

The Southern Poor White in Two Short Stories by William Faulkner

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Résumé : Si le type du pauvre blanc du sud des États-Unis a suscité de nombreuses études sociologiques et historiques aux XX^e et XXI^e siècles, il avait déjà été abordé dans des ouvrages littéraires au XIX^e siècle. Il était souvent représenté, cependant, sous des traits stéréotypés. Pendant les années 1930, celles de la grande Dépression, plusieurs écrivains ont esquissé des portraits littéraires du pauvre blanc du Sud qui tentaient de dépasser ces stéréotypes. Au premier rang de ces auteurs se trouve William Faulkner. Le personnage du pauvre blanc paraît dans une multitude d'ouvrages de Faulkner, romans aussi bien que nouvelles, mais nous avons choisi d'analyser deux de ces dernières – « Wash » et « Barn Burning » – puisqu'elles mettent en relief, d'une façon particulièrement perspicace, la mentalité de ce type social et ses rapports avec les autres classes sociales dans le Sud de la période autour de la guerre de Sécession.

Mots clés : Sud des États-Unis, pauvres blancs, William Faulkner, représentation littéraire de types sociaux.

In her study of the “dispossessed” in the United States since the Civil War, Jacqueline Jones gives a central place to the South, showing the parallel and intertwined development of black and white “underclasses” there, in a region that has produced some of the most severe forms of American poverty.¹ Many other historians have analyzed the antebellum period, and delineated the particular class structure that grew up under the conditions of slavery. In this specific class configuration, the white population was divided among “planters” – a small minority of large slaveholders and landowners –, “yeomen” farmers who owned few or no slaves and relatively small plots of land, and finally “poor whites”, who possessed neither slaves nor land, living precarious and often transient existences. Below all these groups of whites in the social hierarchy was the mass of African-Americans, most of whom were slaves while a minority was free.²

In this *antebellum* society the planter elite dominated and oppressed not only the blacks whom they directly exploited on their plantations, but also the other categories of whites : the yeomanry, because they forced the latter onto the poorest land, but especially the landless whites who were denied work opportunities by the system of slave labor. Blacks and poor whites often lived in similarly miserable conditions, both victims, from different positions, of the same system. Although they did in some cases fraternize, and although the planter class constantly feared they might unite in revolt, the poor whites were finally swayed predominantly by a racial rather than a class identification.³

¹ Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present*, New York, Basic Books, 1992.

² There might be some ambiguity of relative status between the upper ranks of free blacks and the lower levels of poor whites.

³ See Charles Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1994, esp. p. 43, 46, 49, 51. See also Timothy Lockley, “Partners in Crime: African-Americans and Non-slaveholding Whites in Antebellum Georgia”, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, London, Routledge, 1999.

This interclass situation was magisterially analysed by W. J. Cash in his classic study, *The Mind of the South* (1941). Deflating current mythologies of the Old South, Cash asserted that, far from being “aristocratic”, the bulk of the planter elite descended from the same rough frontier stock as the other whites, being only those who had best succeeded in aggressively accumulating land, wealth and slaves. The huge disparity of condition between planter and poor white, who might have common ancestors or kin, was therefore potentially explosive and needed to be defused. This was effected through the ideology of racial superiority. In Cash’s words,

Robbing him and degrading him in so many ways, [plantation slavery] yet, by singular irony, had simultaneously elevated this common white to a position comparable to that of, say, the Doric knight of ancient Sparta. Not only was he not exploited directly, he was himself made by extension a member of the dominant class – was lodged solidly on a tremendous superiority [...] Come what might, he would always be a white man [...] The grand outcome was the almost complete disappearance of economic and social focus on the part of the masses.⁴

For Cash, the practice of a patronizing familiarity by the planters in relation to poor whites was largely effective in quelling incipient anger and resentment. Later historians, while often insisting to a greater extent on the tensions that continually threatened to fissure this ideological construct, have generally concurred that on the whole racism trumped class consciousness.⁵

Although the author of one study of Southern poor whites sees them as a “forgotten people”, and points to three periods in the twentieth century when they were “discovered” and rediscovered by a larger American public,⁶ that social group had been the subject of much, highly diverse literary treatment throughout the nineteenth century. The first important portrayal dates back, in fact, to the early eighteenth century. In *History of the Dividing Line* the Virginia plantation owner William Byrd described in a humorous vein the backcountry “lubbers” he encountered on a surveying excursion. But it was in the nineteenth century that multifarious literary depictions of poor whites proliferated. Defenders of slavery and the plantation ideal published novels in which the poor white played the role of villain, while abolitionists pictured him as vivid proof of the degrading effects of slavery. The so-called “Southwest Humorists” – most notably Augustus B. Longstreet and George Washington Harris – rendered him most often in a clownish, grotesque guise. In the period following the Civil War and into the early twentieth century, a number of writers, in some instances associated with the “local color” movement, adopted generally more serious and positive approaches in their representations of the white underclasses of the South: Joel Chandler Harris, George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin and Ellen Glasgow, to name some of the most prominent. Although critical appreciations of this diverse literature vary considerably, there is often a recognition that these works not uncommonly engage in stereotyping, whether it take the form of demonization, demeaning burlesque or sentimentality.⁷

⁴ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, New York, Vintage, 1991 [Knopf, 1941], p. 39.

⁵ See Charles Bolton, *op. cit.*, p. 8-9, 43, 51, and Jacqueline Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 56, 58, 67, 69.

⁶ Wayne Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People: The South’s Poor Whites*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2004 [new edition]. The three periods mentioned are the populism of the beginning of the twentieth century, the depression years of the 1930s, and the radical 1960s (p. 74-75).

⁷ On this literary tradition, see Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road*, New York, Cooper Square Publishers, 1970; Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction*, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 1976, chap. 1; Duane Carr, *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction*, Bowling Green, OH, Bowling Green State University Popular

In the depression years of the 1930s, during which poverty drastically deepened and extended throughout the United States, one of the primary focal points for awareness of the problem was the rural South. Journalists, photographers and creative writers provided reportage, graphic images and literary representations – sometimes, but not always, from a “committed” political perspective – depicting the condition of the Southern poor. One of the most influential and **original works** was James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a richly idiosyncratic form of literary journalism that was accompanied by Walter Evans’s **striking** photographic work.⁸ Another compelling contribution of a very different sort was the extensive fictional production – both novels and short stories – of Erskine Caldwell, whose best known portrayal of Southern white poverty is *Tobacco Road*.⁹

The third author who stands out in this regard is William Faulkner. Faulkner was a Southern writer *par excellence*, living for most of his life and setting most of his fiction in Mississippi – a quintessential Southern state, as the historian Joel Williamson, one of his biographers, points out.¹⁰ The figure of the poor white plays a significant role in many of Faulkner’s **most important** novels – *Sanctuary*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and the Snopes trilogy – but also in many short stories. **Critics have often compared Faulkner’s and Caldwell’s fictional portrayals of the poor white**, and have found in both cases elements of the comic and the grotesque that in some ways hark back to the early nineteenth-century tradition. They are sometimes seen as sharing stereotypical aspects of that earlier literature. Yet it is also often recognized that at their best they transcend the stereotypes. This is certainly the case with regard to Faulkner. One commentator contends that no other novelist of the 1930s penetrated more effectively “beneath the comic, provincial stereotype” of the poor white, and another claims that *Absalom, Absalom!*, in particular, far from simply reproducing the tropes of the plantation novel tradition “might be thought of as the ultimate deconstruction [of it]”¹¹

In what follows I will examine two short stories by Faulkner – “Wash” and “Barn Burning” – that are commonly recognized as among his best.¹² I hope to show how in them Faulkner not only transcends stereotypes of the poor white but offers important insights into his situation, mentality, and relation to the other social groups with which he interacts.

Press, 1996; Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master’s Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature*, Amherst, MA, University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.

⁸ On Agee’s work, see William Dow, *Narrating Class in American Fiction*, London, Palgrave, 2009, chap. 7: “Class ‘Truths’ in James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*”. On photographic representation of Southern poor whites in the 1930s, see Stuart Kidd, “Visualizing the Poor White”, in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, London, Blackwell, 2004.

⁹ Sylvia Jenkins Cook is also the author of a monograph on Caldwell: *Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty: The Flesh and the Spirit*, Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1991.

¹⁰ Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 13-14.

¹¹ Wayne Flynt, *op. cit.*, p. 76; John M Grammar, “Plantation Fiction”, in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, *op. cit.*, p. 59; see also p. 73-74.

¹² They are both included in the collection of analyses by Hans Skei, one of the leading specialists of the Faulknerian short story: *Reading Faulkner’s Best Short Stories*, Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

“Wash”

“Wash” first appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in February, 1934, and then was republished later in the same year in a collection of Faulkner’s most recent short stories.¹³ Subsequently, following his common practice, Faulkner recast the material and integrated it into a novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, published in 1936. As with other rewritings and textual variants in Faulkner’s work, many interesting aspects of the relationship of the short story to the novelistic version can be brought to the fore through intertextual analysis. But the latter is beyond the scope of the present essay. For the purposes of the discussion here it will suffice to mention one significant difference between “Wash” and the story material as it was reconfigured in *Absalom, Absalom!*

The two main characters of the short story – the only ones to be developed in any detail – are the eponymous Wash, a poor white, and Sutpen, the landowner on whose plantation Wash lives. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the life story of Sutpen, following out his rise and “tragic” fall. In the short story, then, there is a difference of emphasis, with the poor white rather than the planter at center stage. But, most important, in the novel Sutpen’s origins are revealed. Far from descending from some Virginia “aristocracy”, Sutpen was himself born into a poor white family. As a young boy he was turned away from the front door of a planter’s “big house”, and vowed to take revenge for his kind by becoming a rich planter himself. He succeeds in achieving this objective, but not in fully carrying out his plan, which also includes perpetuating his ascendancy through a male heir.

None of this context is present in “Wash”. In the short story Sutpen appears simply as a planter, and consequently his actions cannot be understood through that explanatory framework. One act of Sutpen’s in particular is the trigger for the unfolding of the plot of “Wash”. Sutpen seduces Wash’s granddaughter, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child. The reader of *Absalom, Absalom!* understands Sutpen’s seduction of the girl to be a last, desperate attempt (he has already made others) to have a son who will inherit his plantation and carry on his line, but in “Wash” his motivation is not clarified. This absence does not necessarily constitute a defect in the story, however, and it allows other meanings to emerge.

As Shirley Callen has pointed out in a perceptive essay, by focusing on Wash, and exploring his relations with Sutpen solely in the persona of a planter, the short story develops an “extended analysis of the sociological aspects” that tend to be diluted in the novel’s portrayal of Sutpen’s personal quest.¹⁴ Callen highlights one important sociological dimension of *Absalom, Absalom!* as well, however, in suggesting that the novel confirms W. J. Cash’s thesis, in *The Mind of the South*, concerning the un-aristocratic origins of many planters. Callen also links “Wash” with *The Mind of the South*, seeing the representation in it of the Wash/Sutpen relationship as “marvellously close”, despite some differences, to Cash’s analysis of the typical planter/poor white nexus.¹⁵ I will return later to this question.

The short story is structured in three parts. The first and last parts recount a single, framing event, the last part taking it from where it had been suspended at the end of the first and carrying it through to its conclusion. The middle section offers flashbacks to earlier periods in Wash’s life, which allow the reader to understand the denouement of the story in the third part. Internal

¹³ *Doctor Martino and Other Stories*, New York, Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1934. For full bibliographical details on Faulkner’s short story production, see Harry Runyan, *A Faulkner Glossary*, New York, Citadel Press, p. 228ff.

¹⁴ Shirley Callen, “Planter and Poor White in *Absalom, Absalom!*, ‘Wash’ and *The Mind of the South*”, *The South Central Bulletin* (of the MLA), 23, 4, 1963, p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

dating places the framing event in 1870, five years after the end of the Civil War, and the flashbacks cover periods before, during, and after the war.

The opening section is short – only a page, as compared with the six pages of the middle, and eight pages of the final section – **but it contains already the germs of the story's conclusion.** The scene takes place in the ramshackle hovel in which Wash lives on Sutpen's land. Sutpen is standing above a pallet on which are lying Wash's granddaughter and the baby she has just given birth to. Squatting with them is the black woman who has helped with the birth. Emphasis is laid on two things in the first, descriptive paragraph: Sutpen's imperious dominance (his name is the first word of the story, he stands with "straddled legs" and holds a horsewhip) and the state of destitution of Wash's home, the birthing scene, (openings in the board walls let sunlight in, and the granddaughter has given birth on the floor). A further detail involving the indigence of the setting is significantly added, though, which seems meant to contradict a prevalent stereotype of poor whites: the cloth in which the baby is swaddled is "dingy though clean".¹⁶

The second paragraph is a single, shocking sentence, uttered by Sutpen: "**Well, Milly, [...] too bad you're not a mare. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable**". The short conversation between Sutpen and the black midwife that follows this remark further elaborates on the association by using horse vocabulary in reference to the child.¹⁷ The comment itself, showing as it does that Sutpen cares more for his livestock than for the (poor-white) mother of his child, is at first a shock only for the reader, but the last words of the opening section reveal that Wash, standing outside the shanty, has heard it as well. His outrage, in the strongest sense of the term, will set in motion the final outcome of the story. The concluding sentence of the first part, in addition to revealing Wash's presence within hearing range, introduces another element of the poor-white stereotype – one which is neutralized, but only later. A rusty scythe, borrowed months earlier from Sutpen and standing unused among the weeds it was meant to cut, clearly calls up notions of poor-white laziness and slothfulness. In the end, though, it becomes the instrument of Wash's revenge.

The middle section provides flashbacks, as indicated earlier, but not in chronological order. It opens with the period of the war, then goes back to before the war, and finally jumps forward to **the war's aftermath.** Sutpen went to the war – he again dominates this section by being first mentioned – while Wash did not. The question of why the latter stayed home occurs to both white people of the town and black slaves on the plantation. **Wash's answer to the whites** – that he needs to care for the plantation and slaves in Sutpen's behalf – attempts to put himself on a par with Sutpen. But he is not believed by the townsfolk, who know his real status and consider him "lazy and shiftless" (536). As for the black slaves, they mock him when he tells them that he has to look after his own family, making fun of his poverty and implying that they are superior to him in that they are better treated by Sutpen.¹⁸ After Wash attacks them, quite ineffectually, they seem 'to surround him still with that black laughing, derisive, evasive, inescapable, leaving him panting and impotent and raging'" (537). In a further humiliation, near the end of the war Wash

¹⁶ *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, New York, Vintage, 1977 [Random House, 1950], p. 535. All further references for "Wash" and "Barn Burning" will be to this edition, and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

¹⁷ The newborn is called a "mare" by the black woman, in mimicry of Sutpen. The fact that the baby is a girl has greater significance in *Absalom, Absalom!*, since Sutpen's sole purpose is known to be to sire a male heir.

¹⁸ In doing so they address him as "white man". As Caroline Miles points out astutely, this form of address paradoxically "signifies his class and his difference from other whites": Caroline Miles, "William Faulkner's Critique of Capitalism: Reading 'Wash' and 'Centaur in Brass' as Stories about Class Struggle", *Mississippi Quarterly*, 61, 3, Summer (June) 2008, p. 328.

is turned away from the **back door of Sutpen's mansion** (just as the young Sutpen was barred from the front door of another "big house", in *Absalom, Absalom!*) by a black house servant who reminds him that he never entered the manor before, when the master was there. Before the war Wash had in fact chosen not to try entering the house, convincing himself that Sutpen would have allowed him to but not wishing to put it to the test.¹⁹

The text then turns to a brief evocation of the prewar period, describing the interactions between Wash and Sutpen in a way that focuses attention on the social subtleties of the relationship. While they from time to time fraternize, it is only outside the house and when Sutpen has no visitors. Then Wash is summoned to fill the void. For entire afternoons they drink whiskey together in the grape arbor, but with their difference of status clearly marked in spatial terms, "Sutpen in the hammock and Wash squatting against a post [...]" (538). Otherwise Wash only sees Sutpen from afar as the latter rides his black stallion around the plantation. But instead of feeling his class inferiority when he sees the master surveying his domain, Wash identifies with Sutpen; the world Wash inhabits, in which black slaves "were better found and housed and even clothed than he and his", becomes illusory, giving way to the true reality beneath, the equestrian image of the ruling white man, with whom he is one (538).

After the war, like many plantation owners Sutpen is severely impoverished, and to survive resorts to keeping a small store. His relationship with Wash undergoes some subtle changes, but continues on fundamentally the same. Now they drink a cheap whisky together in the back of the store after closing time. The spatial hierarchy that had earlier held in the grape arbor is still respected, although the distance is somewhat lessened – Sutpen sits on a chair, and Wash on "whatever box or keg was handy" (539). Now **Wash regularly enters Sutpen's house**, but only to bring the latter home when he is incapacitated by drink. After putting Sutpen to bed Wash stays, but only to keep a watchful eye on him from his pallet on the floor. Wash continues to maintain his quasi-worship of, and identification with Sutpen – a bond which Wash defines as a shared refusal of defeat in the Civil War: "**We ain't whupped yit, air we?**", he assures a drunken Sutpen, "Me and you kin do hit" (540).

But in several places in the text the reader is told that Wash's eyes have a "questioning" look (536, 539). Although the nature of the question he is asking is never explicitly articulated, it is clearly addressed to Sutpen, and seems to ask the latter for confirmation that they are equals in the brotherhood of Southern white men (united therefore in defense of the lost cause of the *antebellum* order). It also seems to be wanting reassurance that Sutpen is in fact the ideal figure of his worship. In the scene that concludes the middle section of the story, when Wash notices **Sutpen's overtures to his granddaughter** he ultimately confronts the planter. At first his eyes again question, but finally, although Sutpen only responds evasively, "**Wash's gaze no longer questioned. It was tranquil, serene**" (541), and he reaffirms his faith that in everything he does Sutpen "**will make hit right**" (542).

The final part of the story, unlike the first two, opens with Wash rather than Sutpen – an appropriate contrast since in the concluding part the tables will be turned. But at the outset, as Wash **stands outside his shack before dawn, listening to his granddaughter's cries as she is in labor**, he again overcomes his incipient doubts to reaffirm a total faith in Sutpen. When the child

¹⁹ For an intertextual discussion of "black laughter" and the primal scene of the poor white attempting to enter the plantation house, see Jacques Pothier, "Black Laughter: Poor White Short Stories Behind *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Hamlet*" in *William Faulkner's Short Fiction: An International Symposium*, Hans Skei, ed., Oslo, Solum Forlag, 1997.

is born and Wash enters his home, he even feels “dispossessed” of it by the awesome presence of the offspring of his idol. The fall comes all the harder, then, when he overhears Sutpen’s fatal utterance. As he comes out of the house to take news of the birth to Sutpen, the latter arrives on his own, is told that he is the father of a girl, and goes inside. Wash remains outside. The comment that he then hears coming from within deals a devastating blow that destroys his fragile, illusory worldview: “it seemed to him that he stood beneath a strange sky, in a strange scene, familiar only as things are familiar in dreams [...]” (544). Having at last fully understood the nature of Sutpen, Wash moves to attack him as he comes out of the house, but it is only when Sutpen lashes his face with the whip that Wash takes up the unused, borrowed scythe and kills the planter with it.

In the sequel to this spontaneous act of revolt, Wash waits in the house, knowing that sooner or later the “men of Sutpen’s own kind” will discover what he has done and come to get him. As he reflects, he comes to see Sutpen and his relation with Sutpen as part of a larger pattern. The men of his kind who will come are, like Sutpen, “symbols also of admiration and hope; instruments too of despair and grief”. When he contemplates flight Wash realizes that “he would merely be fleeing one set of bragging and evil shadows for another just like them, since they were all of a kind throughout all the earth which he knew [...]”. Nor does he feel the strength to envisage “escap[ing] beyond the boundaries of earth where such men lived, set the order and the rule of living” (547). As the day advances, Washes disillusion deepens. He comes to understand why, led by such men, the South lost the war, and to wish that none of them had returned alive from it. His thinking finally culminates in wishing not only for the destruction of the ruling class he had believed in, but also of his own people : “Better if his kind and mine too had never drawn the breath of life on this earth. Better that all who remain of us be blasted from the face of earth [...]” (548). This last wish presages the final, apocalyptic scene of the story. Wash kills his granddaughter, lights on fire his tumbledown house, and, again wielding the scythe, charges the “men of Sutpen’s own kind” who have come for him, propelling himself towards a sure death.²⁰

“Wash”, then, is a story that first explores the huge gap between ideology and reality in the consciousness of a poor Southern white man – his refusal to acknowledge his class position and his illusory identification with the ruling elite through a racial concept – but then brings that man to a sudden, overwhelming revelation of the harsh reality of class. The first moment fits strikingly with W. J. Cash’s analysis, a few years after the appearance of Faulkner’s story, of the characteristic mentality of poor whites in the South. The second moment would seem to be excluded from Cash’s diagnosis of the situation, leading Shirley Callen, cited earlier, to point to a difference between Cash and Faulkner in this respect.²¹ Yet in at least one passage of *The Mind of the South* Cash does entertain, if only hypothetically, the possibility of a new awareness of class. Although poor whites may at some times feel “spite and envy”, he writes, “to get to a genuine class feeling toward [the planter elite] you would have to have an extraordinarily vivid sense of

²⁰ In his otherwise insightful discussion of poor whites in Faulkner’s work, Tony Fabijancic presents Wash’s killing of his own family at the end of the story as apparently “the act of a madman”. In my view, though, it follows with chilling logic from the radical nature of his new awareness. See Tony Fabijancic, “Reification, Dereification, Subjectivity: Towards a Marxist Reading of William Faulkner’s Poor-White Topography”, *Faulkner Journal*, 10, 1, Fall 1994, p. 87.

²¹ Shirley Callen, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

brutal and intolerable wrong”.²² In “Wash”, we might say, Faulkner created a fiction in which just such a “brutal and intolerable wrong” precipitates an awakening to class.

“Barn Burning”

The second story I will discuss was first published in 1939 – five years after “Wash”, also in *Harper’s Magazine*. It was reprinted in a collection only in 1950, in the comprehensive *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* that I am using as a reference for quotations in this essay. As in the case of “Wash”, some of its material was introduced into a novel – *The Hamlet*, which appeared the year after the magazine publication of “Barn Burning” – but the relation between the two versions is in this case less significant. At the opening of *The Hamlet*, a character in the novel briefly retells the central incident of “Barn Burning” from his own point of view, but it has been transformed so as not to include the young boy who is central to the short story version. While there is something important subtracted, then, there is nothing added **in the novel’s account** that is of consequence, **as with Sutpen’s social origin in the other story.**

“Barn Burning”, like “Wash”, concerns the relationship between poor whites and planters, with blacks also present in a subsidiary role, but here a crucial dynamic of the story involves difference and conflict within the group of poor whites. The latter is a family of Snopes, who play **a major role in Faulkner’s overall saga of the imaginary Yoknapatawpha county** of Northern Mississippi in which most of his fiction is set. As a whole, the Snopes clan symbolizes the incursion of a degraded modernity into the Old South, which **in Faulkner’s writings** is effected via the rise, after the Civil War, of some formerly poor whites to positions of wealth and power along with the generalization of a commercial ethos. But as most critics emphasize, the Snopes family members that appear in different Faulknerian texts are in fact quite varied, and the struggle over social values takes place within the Snopes as well as between them and others. This internal variance and confrontation is central to the representation of the Snopes who appear in “Barn Burning”, at a stage when the family is still dirt poor. Moreover, the oppositions that are presented there are not manichean, and one of the main thrusts of the story is to make apparent that even questionable or reprehensible behavior on the part of poor whites stems from their situation.

The Snopes of “Barn Burning” are a family unit of seven. Headed by Abner Snopes – the instigator of the barn burning of the title – it includes his wife, two sons and two daughters, and **his wife’s sister**. The only two members of this family – indeed, the only characters in the story as a whole – who are fully elaborated are Abner and his youngest son. The principal confrontation is between them, although other family members also affiliate themselves with one or the other side. The action of the story takes place several decades after that of “Wash”, at a time less precisely specified than in the latter: in the early 1890s, some thirty years after the Civil War. Unlike “Wash”, “Barn Burning” is narrated in a simple chronological sequence, punctuated by several highlighted scenes.

The story opens with a court scene – in a country store that serves as courthouse – and a second rural trial will be staged later in the story as well. Thus “Barn Burning” includes an element of the social context that is not part of “Wash”: the legal system as it impacts planter/poor white relations. Although judicial action is particularly emphasized by its positioning in the first scene, poverty in fact takes priority in the *incipit*. The first sentence

²² W. J. Cash, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

announces that the store in which the trial is taking place smells of cheese, and that odor, along with the tin cans “whose labels his stomach read” (3) obsesses the hungry younger son of Abner – who will be the center of consciousness throughout the story – as he squats in the rear of the store. The case involves an accusation of barn burning brought against Abner by a local landowner. The dispute had begun over Abner’s pig breaking into the landowner’s corn, and Abner’s neglecting to use the wire the landowner gave him to repair the pig’s pen (the image of the wire “still rolled on to the spool in his yard” [3-4] might recall Wash’s unused scythe). The landowner then charges Abner a dollar for the damage caused, and, after he receives in response a barely veiled threat from the latter, his barn burns. It is clear from the boy’s thoughts that the charge against Abner is true, but the justice of the peace insists on the need for proof, and the landowner will not go so far as to call for the boy’s testimony – which would pit a son against his father. At this stage the boy, although distressed at the prospect that he might be called up and have to lie, entirely identifies with his father against the landowner, their “enemy” (4).

In the opening scene the boy’s name is given as “Colonel Sartoris Snopes”. The first name “Colonel Sartoris” – its abbreviation, Sarty, is later used – might indicate that in naming the boy Abner wished to inscribe his desire for social ascension, since elsewhere in Faulkner’s work the Sartoris family is the principal representative of the planter elite and its descendancy. But in Faulkner’s symbolic universe the name also suggests a potential for thought and action that transcends the Snopes’s typical tendencies, a potential perhaps for some kind of metaphorical “nobility”, and this would seem to be borne out in the sequel.

Abner, on the other hand, is characterized in generally disagreeable terms. He insults the court, in spite of the fact that he has not been convicted for lack of proof, and it is revealed that this incident is only the last in a series of repeated barn burnings for which he was responsible, followed each time by the family’s moving on to an area where he was not yet known. We learn also that Abner owes his limp to being shot in the heel while stealing horses during the Civil War (later in the narrative we are told that trade in stolen goods was his sole wartime activity). As the family travels by wagon to the next place where they will be sharecropping, Abner orders the entire family about in the same way that he whips the mules: fiercely and imperiously, but also coldly. When he hits Sarty as punishment for what he imagines would have been Sarty’s betrayal of him if questioned by the judge, he does so “hard but without heat”, and the boy sees him against the night sky as “a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though cut from tin [...]” (8). These traits and images, along with the mechanical aspect of his limping gait, associate him with Faulkner’s conception of a soulless modernity seen to be invading the South.

These undeniably negative characteristics of Abner are however to some extent counterbalanced by other attributes, and, most important, are made comprehensible through contextualization. Although they are “wolflike”, he exhibits the qualities of “independence and even courage” (7) in his actions, and he is seen to use fire as a “weapon for the preservation of integrity” (8). Integrity needs to be preserved against the landowner, to whom the sharecropper totally submits himself in a highly exploitative relation. Abner shows an exacerbated awareness of his position when, as soon as the family has arrived at their destination, he feels impelled to “have a word with the man that aims to begin to-morrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months” (9).

What follows is the second of the highlighted incidents of the story. It constitutes a further permutation of one of the primal scenes in Faulkner’s fiction – that of a poor white approaching a planter’s “big house”, access to which is controlled in part by black servants. We have already

seen two variants of the scene, with Sutpen as a boy, and Wash as a man, being refused entry to two such mansions. In “Barn Burning” both a man and a boy, father and son, approach the house of their new landlord. Instead of being turned away and accepting the refusal of access, though, this time the poor white man, Abner, who has been characterized as having “a ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions” (7), barges into the big house uninvited, with Sarty in tow, pushing past the Negro domestic who opens the front door. But Abner carries the aggression much further. Having purposely walked through a pile of horse manure on his way in, he soils the entry carpet, rubbing in the excrement with “the machinelike deliberation” of his stiff, lame foot (11). He completes the insult by scraping off his boot ostentatiously on the front porch after he has left the house (the landlord was not at home).

The carpet that Abner has besmirched is “pale” or “blond” in color, and as he and Sarty walk away from the house he looks back at it and comments pointedly to his son: “Pretty and white, ain’t it? [...] That’s sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain’t white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it” (12). Here, then, Abner shows a lucid understanding that **behind the beautiful, white surface appearance of the (white) planter’s domestic environment lies the reality of hard labor by blacks.** And, in a gesture that we can recognize as part of the poor-white mentality analyzed by W. J. Cash, he signifies his reticence to lower himself to the same kind of humiliating exploitation.

Sarty, in the meantime, has experienced the episode very differently. When he first glimpses the mansion, the likes of which he has never before seen, “**Hit’s big as a courthouse he thought** quietly, with a surge of peace and joy [...]. They are safe from him. People whose lives are a part of this peace and dignity are beyond his touch [...].” (10). He falls under the “spell” of the house, and desires it, but “without envy” or the “jealous rage” which he perceives his father to feel in its presence. He continues to hope, though, that “[m]aybe it will even change him now from what **maybe he couldn’t help but be**” (11).

Here a differentiation between Abner and Sarty is introduced, although it has not yet become at this stage an opposition or conflict. In the sequel to the soiling of the carpet the differentiation **is extended to Abner’s family as a whole.** Father and son return to the dwelling in which they will be living – **in stark contrast to the landlord’s house, an unpainted, two-room cabin** for seven people. Soon the landlord himself arrives on horseback with the damaged rug, and angrily demands that the tenant family clean it. Their response to this demand reveals a significant division in the family. Abner orders his two daughters – from whom, it had earlier been indicated, “emanated an incorrigible idle inertia” (12) – to do the cleaning, and they unsurprisingly begin to do it incompetently. Their mother, who had asked to do the job herself and been refused by Abner, watches them hopelessly as they apply lye, further defacing the rug. When she then sees Abner scrutinize a piece of rock he has picked up, and begs him, “Abner. **Abner. Please don’t.**” (14), it becomes clear both that he is already contemplating his next barn burning and that she abhors the idea.

The further mutilated rug is returned, and the furious landowner reacts by docking twenty **bushels from his tenant’s future corn crop.** Sarty, still unwilling to desolidarize himself from his father in his confrontation with the new landlord, finds that the latter is unjust and that the penalty should not be paid. Nevertheless, in the following days he works hard on the new farm work, “with an industry that did not need to be driven nor even commanded twice” (16). In this he takes after his mother, the reader is told. She and her sister are also resourceful, and have put aside enough money to buy Sarty a small axe for Christmas. The three of them work together,

after the rug incident, building livestock pens “which were a part of his father’s contract with the landlord” (17). Thus a sub-group emerges in the Snopes family that is intelligent and hard-working, but also willing, pragmatically, to submit to the requirements of their situation.

Abner has other things in mind, however, and before resorting to barn burning again decides to take his landlord to court. In the country court scene that follows, the landowner’s face manifests “amazed unbelief [...] at the incredible circumstance of being sued by one of his own tenants”, as Abner stubbornly claims that the charge on his future crop is unwarranted since he has fulfilled the landlord’s request to the letter: “I washed the tracks out and took the rug back to him” (18). As in the first court scene, the judge demonstrates marked fairness in dealing with the case. He rejects Abner’s claim, pointing out that Abner did not return the rug “in the same condition it was in before [...]” (18), but at the same time finds that the landlord’s charge is excessively heavy, and halves it. Sarty, though, still taking his father’s side, tells the latter defiantly after the trial that they shouldn’t pay even that.

It is only in the final scene, and denouement of the story, that Sarty’s difference becomes an opposition, accompanied by that of his mother and aunt as well. For Abner, knowing perhaps that it will be impossible to avoid paying the fine, sets his mind immediately to barn burning. After dinner on the night of the trial, Sarty hears his mother’s cries of protest and sees Abner filling a can with kerosine. This time he balks, and questions his father’s intention. Seeing an incipient revolt in Sarty, Abner turns to the older brother, who has played no role in the story other than to passively, and with bovine stupidity, follow the paternal lead. At his recommendation to tie Sarty to a bedpost, Abner instead commands his wife to hold him, seemingly as a test of her submission to his will. As Sarty struggles, she tries to keep a grip on him, clearly for fear of his being harmed if he escapes, but her sister, no longer able to contain herself, tells her to let go and cries out: “If he don’t go, before God, I am going up there myself!” (22). But Sarty succeeds in pulling free, and is able to carry out what his aunt has understood he wants to do – warn the landlord.

In yet another mutation of the scene of the poor white approaching the big house, Sarty runs into it at full tilt, past the black servant at the door, and screams his warning to the landlord – “the white man too emerging from a white door down the hall” (23). The landlord orders the black man to catch Sarty, but the latter is able to escape his grasp because his “entire sleeve, rotten with washing, carried away” (23) – a final reminder both of the poverty of the family and of the mother’s attempt to maintain cleanliness and make do. Sarty dashes toward the site of the projected arson, presumably to warn his father, but is passed by the landlord on horseback. Sarty hears shots, and runs on. On a far-off hill much later, before he continues into the woods and away, his reflections show that even after having affirmed his own point of view and taken a stand against his father, Sarty clings to an admiration for him, believing, as Abner had doubtless mendaciously told him, that he had bravely fought in the war in the cavalry troop of his namesake, Colonel Sartoris.

In “Barn Burning”, then, we are given a variegated image of the poor white, a portrayal of multiple attitudes and behaviors in the context of severe deprivation and social exploitation. The story focuses particularly, of course, on the figure of Abner, and concerning him critical views have tended to polarize. In her 1976 study of the Southern poor white in fiction, Sylvia Jenkins Cook wrote of a “general consensus of opinion in interpretation: Ab Snopes, the barn burner, is

Faulkner's devil, disrupting the social order".²³ Twenty years later, the pendulum had apparently swung far to the other extreme, prompting Jacques Pothier to allude to "modern readings which have made Abner Snopes and his elder son the hero of tenant-farmer class-consciousness and rebellion [...]".²⁴ As should be clear from the foregoing analysis, and as both Cook and Pothier concur in the terms of their own readings, neither extreme does justice to the complexity of the text.

Although Abner carries some germs of the *nouveau-riche* "Snopes-ism" that will later ravage Faulkner's South, in "Barn Burning" Abner and his family are still very poor sharecroppers, and Abner's barn burning can be seen as a form of social protest.²⁵ His anger is sterile and self-defeating, however, and Sarty, along with his mother and aunt, are shown to project more positive human values. Sarty shares his father's sense of social injustice, though, and finds himself in a bind, since when he opposes the barn burning he also acts in behalf of his class "enemy", the landlord. His admiration for the "big house" might also be seen as a form of class alienation. But in Faulkner's terms it is something other than that. Sarty dreams at one point in front of a circus poster (20), and clearly both the circus and the big house are symbols of his aspiration for a brighter life. The conclusion of the story points towards a possible new life for him, although he leaves behind, unchanged, the harrowing conditions of poor-white existence in the South. As I hope to have demonstrated, Faulkner's fiction – in particular the two stories I have discussed – provides some richly-modulated imaginative perceptions of that existence

²³ Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁴ Jacques Pothier, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

²⁵ An historian who has studied the phenomenon in both black and white poor populations, claims that "as an act of protest in the half-century following the Civil War, arson generally constituted a means by which the poor and propertyless could strike out against those who dominated a racist and economically exploitive society": Albert C. Smith, "'Southern Violence' Reconsidered: Arson as Protest in Black-Belt Georgia, 1865-1910", *The Journal of Southern History*, 51, 4, Nov. 1985, p. 556. Faulkner's "Barn Burning" is mentioned on p. 555.