

## Nature and Predestination in William Faulkner's "Dry September"

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**Abstract** William Faulkner's Protestant culture, as well as his will to revitalize the Christian message, has a strong influence on his literary production. His work is not simply rich in images and motives related to the Protestant religious tradition: it expresses a vision of the world which is deeply influenced by philosophical concepts belonging to that tradition. These concepts, defined for the first time by Protestant reformers, have been repeatedly reformulated through history by different thinkers and artists in the language of their age. Faulkner's view of the particular notions of damnation and predestination, underlying many of his works, plays a central role in the short story "Dry September", where it is illustrated both in symbolical and realistic terms. Faulkner's conception of predestination and damnation is very close to the one expressed by the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology*. The affinity between Faulkner's and Tillich's view is not surprising. Indeed, the German theologian faced the themes which the American writer inherited from his Protestant ancestors in the light of the spirit of his same age, an age which experienced historical and cultural upheavals, such as the World War and the rise of psychoanalysis.

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William Faulkner shares with other modernist writers the propensity to take concepts, motives, and images inherited from the past tradition and, to use Pound's words, "make them new". The main source he relies on is the religious Protestant culture that accompanied the birth of the first New England colonies. As Hyatt H. Waggoner rightly pointed out in *William Faulkner. From Jefferson to The World*, Faulkner "takes creedal Christianity, apparently, as unhistorical myth containing profound redemptive moral and psychological truth which he has undertaken to reinterpret in modern terms" (1959, 248). Indeed, Faulkner re-elaborates and enriches some aspects of Protestant religion according to twentieth-century sensibility, while maintaining their deep meaning essentially unchanged. He treats the particular notions of predestination and damnation not in relation to their primeval eschatological meaning but in relation to earthly life, in spite of their religious origin. As can be demonstrated by making particular reference to the short story "Dry September", the new form these notions thus acquire can be analyzed through the reflections of Paul Tillich, the theologian who reformulated the Lutheran doctrine in the light of modern existential thought.

Existence implies two painful experiences for many of Faulkner's characters: they perceive their physical and spiritual limitation as incompleteness and as a source suffering, but they also live in a state of conflict with themselves, other people, and their world. In the novels whose protagonists are the Compson family and the Sartoris family, the conflict of the individual with reality manifests itself mainly as inability to adapt to the modern world, dominated by amorality and selfishness. Such inability is often accompanied by the nostalgia for the South of the past, usually evoked as an orderly world where life was regulated by precise ethical and social codes. The old South, forever erased by an irreparable decline, is often mythicized in Faulkner's work. Significantly enough, in *The Sound and the Fury* it tends to overlap with the world of childhood, where the temporary ignorance of the most painful aspects of human existence engenders serenity and a feeling of security. As a consequence, in Faulkner's work both childhood and the past acquire the suggestive power characterizing the edenic symbols.

At the base of this view of human life and feelings there are the features of existence that Paul Tillich identifies with the state of sin and describes in philosophical terms. In Tillich's view, existing means to have experienced the loss of a previous condition of union with the One - the Being or God - to which everything originally belongs. Entering existence means entering a new condition of finitude and precariousness, sooner or later destined to become the object of a painful realization for the individual. The condition of 'alienation', or separation from what one belongs to, tends to provoke a deep feeling of nostalgia and, most of all, several inner and external conflicts. Such conflicts can be overcome only through love, meant as aspiration to reunification (Tillich 1963, 29-44, 59-62). In figures like Dilsey and Lena Grove, their capacity to love nullifies the negative implications of what Tillich defines 'alienation'. In other cases, the implications of alienation develop up to the point where they engender in the characters' states of radical conflict with their peers, their world, and, most of all, with themselves. These conflicts often take the form of psychic and psychological disorders, such as obsessions and neuroses, that can be caused by traumatic events or deep mental deficiencies. Sometimes the desperation caused by the inability to overcome these states of conflict results in unsolvable conditions of suffering and even processes of self-destruction. Sometimes it arouses that feeling of hostility toward one's fellowman with which Faulkner seems to identify moral corruption.

Faulkner's view of the moral implication of the 'state of sin', as just defined, is clearly an evolution of the view embraced by seventeenth-century American Calvinists. In Protestant thought, the state of sin - meant as a state of separation from God - manifests itself concretely in the human inability to want the real Good, the Good inspired by the love for God and other men. More precisely, the state of sin provokes an obfuscation of the human faculties that makes the individual unable to recognize the

real Good and leads him to selfishly want his own good, that is Evil. In the eighteenth century, the American theologian Jonathan Edwards<sup>1</sup> explained in detail the causes of this “obfuscation” in his treatise entitled *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758). According to Edwards, the first human being had two different kinds of “principles” within itself. The inferior or “natural” principles were essentially appetites and passions such as self-love. The superior or “supernatural” principles consisted of the spiritual features that formed the image of God in the human beings and conferred moral qualities to them. Originally, these two kinds of principles balanced each other in human kind but, after its rebellion, God revoked the supernatural principles provoking the dominion and the excess of the natural ones, that became what the scriptures call “flesh”. Human kind remained then in a mere state of nature and the inclination to selfishness that is the source of moral evil originated in it (Edwards 1970, 381-4). According to Perry Miller, Edward’s supernatural principle essentially results in the possibility to perceive the harmony of creation and experience a consequent feeling of consent towards it. When human beings are deprived of this possibility, they cannot recognize the inherent Good and, as a consequence, they prefer objective goods to it. Human kind’s loss of the supernatural principle is the reason why History is dominated by selfishness and violence (Miller 1949, 275-6).

Only divine Grace can heal human being’s faculties and restore their original equilibrium. Grace is the acceptance of being accepted by God, the acceptance of the message of acceptance contained in the Scriptures (Tillich 1968, 229). It does not result in a simple external adhesion to a doctrine or a code of behaviour. Grace is something that leads the individual to accept God’s design gladly, to honestly want what God wants and act consequently. In this view, sin is not in the individual’s actions but in his heart and in his authentic will, hence in the ‘spirit’ in which he acts.

According to the doctrine of predestination, God gives Grace only to those who are destined to salvation and denies it to those who are destined to damnation, in order to make both of them play a role inside His providential design. The aim of such design is the triumph of the divine glory in the creation: the fulfilment of an overall harmony that the weak human reasoning cannot grasp in its entirety. As Tillich explained in *A History of Christian Thought* (1968), faith in predestination originates from the empirical observation of the fact that not everyone heard Christ’s love message while some, in spite of hearing it, did not understand it. Paradoxically, the doctrine of predestination does not deny the freedom of human will. When human beings want the Evil, they sincerely want it and they pursue

1 In the twentieth century, facing the menace of Calvinist orthodoxy that the spreading of the ideas of Enlightenment in the New Continent represented, Jonathan Edwards restated the main Calvinists doctrines in a clearer way, often using the same instruments of rationalism.

it on their own accord. Still, their freedom is the instrument through which God works in the world. There is no real contradiction in this, because the level of divine action and the level of human action – meant as a mixture of freedom and destiny – are independent from each other (267, 269).

In Faulkner's work, moral corruption is often engendered or accompanied by those states of psychic malaise that are the extreme developments of the existential alienation described by Tillich. Sometimes, the suffering that these mental states provoke can foment the most selfish and aggressive instincts characterizing human nature. Once aroused, such instincts can affect the individual's vision of the world up to producing, in some characters, sadistic and cruel drives, that they can either choose or cannot help but follow. In other words, extreme selfishness and cruelty are often the results of the suffering that existence inflicts on the human being. Most of the time, Faulkner does not seem to identify the cause of this suffering with the absence of Grace – or acceptance of the divine love – but rather, with the experience of feeling rejected by one's fellowman and the consequent inability to receive and give love.

This interpretation can be applied to some of the most 'negative' characters inhabiting Faulkner's novels. Jason Compson is cut off from the love of his father and his siblings by a neurotic and egocentric mother. As a consequence, he addresses to himself the love he could have given to others, nourishing his own selfishness. Moreover his sense of exclusion makes him constantly rancorous towards his relatives and the people who surround him (Volpe 2003, 122-3). The neurosis, the obsessions, and the persecution complex that he inherited from his mother arouse in him feelings of hostility towards the entire world and an undefined desire for revenge. The gangster Popeye is abandoned by his father and neglected by his mother, who is numbed by syphilis. Since the physical and mental consequences of the illness that he inherited from his parents make him feel isolated and cut off from life, he succeeds in asserting his existence just by giving death. In the first years of Popeye's life, his victims are little animals, in his adult years they are human beings (Vickery 1966, 133). Joe Christmas is abandoned, as a child, in an orphanage where he is mocked for the colour of his skin. This experience makes him hate himself up to the point that he hates whoever loves him (Waggoner 1959, 103-4). As a consequence, he develops a sadomasochist attitude and murderous drives. As will be illustrated in detail later, the moral corruption of the protagonists of "Dry September" as well is caused by the psychological malaise stemming from their condition of extreme alienation and their desperate inability to overcome it, in a world where love seems to be totally absent. The power of their egoistical and cruel drives is so strong that it leads them to consciously or unconsciously distort reality in order to satisfy their tendencies.

In Faulkner's work, the role played by destiny – or predestination – in an individual life takes on a new and more problematic form than in his

ancestors' view. As previously explained, according to Calvinist theology, since it is destiny that determines the spiritual condition of the individual and, as a consequence, his will, human beings are not free to choose what they want, but they are free to choose following their authentic will. This means that each human action is an expression of both freedom and destiny. In Faulkner's novels, freedom and destiny intertwine more intricately, up to the point that most of the time it is not possible to understand where the border between them lies. Destiny manifests itself essentially through nature. Nevertheless, in this case, Nature is not meant as Edwards meant it, namely as a combination of appetites and passions. It is meant in its broadest sense, as external circumstances and, most of all, inner drives having mainly psychic and psychological origins. Faulkner's characters exercise their freedom starting from these two elements and from their influence on the individual will. Generally speaking, destiny actualizes itself in the given - in this case provided by Nature - starting from which the human being makes its choices. In order to be absolutely free, an action should be completely disjointed from any context and circumstance. Since this is not possible, freedom and destiny coexist in every human action. In this respect, like in others, Faulkner's view resembles Tillich's. According to the German theologian, destiny intertwines with personal freedom in every human action - including the one that provokes the fall -, most of times taking the form of nature. In the *Book of Genesis*, destiny, meant as nature, is symbolized by the serpent who influences Adam and Eve's choice to transgress God's command without releasing them from their responsibility (Tillich 1965, 32, 33-4).

In spite of what these reflections might suggest, it would be wrong to define Faulkner a naturalist or a determinist writer. The dynamics of nature, as he conceives them, do often contribute to make his characters what they are and to determine the way they act in the world, but it is rarely possible to understand to what extent they do so. In Faulkner's overall production, the space left by nature for human freedom is not always clear. Moreover this space seems to vary in each novel and even for each character. Some characters - like the Compson brothers - seem to be led by their psychic condition to act under the spell of their own compulsions, while others - like Horace Benbow - are clearly able to choose and act more freely.

As Hyatt H. Waggoner wrote, the classification of Faulkner as an authentically Christian author is made problematic by the fact that often, in his work, "the crucifixion is central and pragmatic, but the resurrection might never have occurred". In other words, if the Christian thought emphasizes the tragic nature of the human condition in order to remind that such condition is temporary and can be one day transcended (as Christ's resurrection testifies), in Faulkner's work tragedy often seems to be final and impossible to overcome (1959, 247-8). That is the case in "Dry Sep-

tember". The short story describes a world afflicted by desperation and violence, where the rare manifestations of human solidarity are destined to remain sterile. In order to persuade herself and other people to still be young and attractive, Minnie Cooper accuses Will Mayes of having molested her. Her accusation gives McLendon and other men dominated by violent impulses a pretext to vent them on a black man who, as such, is not protected by justice. These events happen thanks to the approval of an intimately violent society, whose implicit complicity with the murderers render Hawkshaw's attempt to save Will Mayes ineffective. The short story is composed of five sections. The first, the third, and the fifth revolve around McLendon and the killing of Will Mayes, while the second and the fourth sections describe Minnie Cooper's inner conflicts and crisis.

"Dry September" - originally entitled "Drought" - is set in an infernal atmosphere that symbolically evokes the personal 'hell' experienced by its two protagonists, their existential condition of alienation, desperation, solitude, and spiritual sterility. But the story's atmosphere also alludes to the oppressive and cruel nature of the community to which the characters belong. The events take place in suffocatingly hot weather, the presence of which is particularly powerful in the three sections dedicated to McLendon. Significantly enough, these sections are dominated by the motifs of aridity, sweat, and stale air. The air becomes saturated with dust in the third and the fifth sections, whose dark settings resemble, in many respects, the underworld as it is portrayed in the collective imagination.<sup>2</sup>

By setting his story in an infernal context alluding to the characters' inner condition, Faulkner conveys the idea that hell is a symbol of a spiritual state commonly experienced in human existence. This idea is far from being alien to Protestant thought. Luther believes that hell is not a place but a state (Tillich 1968, 233), namely the state of those who feel the desperation of being separated from God, the only real "punishment" that can be suffered by the human being (230). In other words, hell is the spiritual and emotional condition experienced by the individual who lives in the state of sin. This conception is related to the notion of 'spiritual death' defined by Edwards. The spiritual death, that entered the world on the eve of the fall, is the condition of spiritual misery deriving from the loss of an original state of union with God. In Edwards's view such condition is eternal, because it is destined to affect the human being even after its biological death, unless the divine grace saves him (1970, 238-9, 309). Tillich, like Luther, considers "condemnation" one of the symbols of desperation but, unlike Edwards, he holds that the idea of "eternal damnation" is misleading, because God alone is eternal. The human being,

2 For further details about "Dry September"'s landscapes, cf. Jack F. Stewart (1979), "The Infernal Climate of Faulkner's "Dry September".

instead, is finite in time and space, end as a consequence, cannot suffer an eternal condemnation. Being desperate, feeling "doomed" means perceiving more or less consciously as insurmountable the experience of being bound to God – meant as the foundation of each being and the very Being itself – without being united with Him in the act of love (1963, 78). The personal hell of the protagonists of "Dry September" consists exactly in the desperation of experiencing a condition of radical alienation, in a world apparently devoid of the unifying principle of love. In the short story alienation takes all its possible forms: separation and conflict from oneself, one's peers, and one's world.

According to Tillich, the desperation provoked by alienation tends to result in several forms of self-destruction. In general, the human being has an innate suicidal tendency deriving from its longing for rest without conflicts. Such tendency, named "death instinct" by Freud, engenders the human desire for intoxication and, in the most painful moments, the temptation to escape pain by eliminating oneself. When desperation strengthens the death instinct, undermining the unconscious will to live, it can induce physical or psychological suicide. The latter consists in the suspension of the resistance to the threat of non-being usually deriving from the radicalization of one of the conflicts characterizing human existence (Tillich 1963, 75-6). Besides inducing her to alcoholism, Minnie Cooper's alienation and desperation produce an unsolvable and self-destructive inner conflict in her, while McLendon's alienation and desperation produce an opposite effect: a destructive attitude towards the external world. In both cases, desperation is accompanied by a process of moral corruption, because Minnie and McLendon use another human being as an instrument to make their condition more tolerable, sacrificing his life. All this can be better understood by a detailed analysis of the two characters.

The reasons of McLendon's desperation are not as evident as those of Minnie Cooper's, but his spiritual condition is clearly symbolized by the infernal scenarios that surround him in each episode of the short story. In the last section, he contemplates in solitude the dark and silent world extending beyond the porch of his house, that appears to him "stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars" (Faulkner 1955, 338). Moreover, the raging attitude he shows even towards the members of his family demonstrates that love and the possibility of conciliation with himself and other people are totally absent from his life.

McLendon "turns to sadistic violence as a means of asserting his existence" (Waggoner 1959, 196) because this is the only way he knows to rebel against the "non-being" that threatens him and his own desire to find a liberation from insurmountable desperation. Since he constantly feels beset by spiritual death, he succeeds in feeling alive only when giving death. Significantly enough, right from the very beginning the author presents McLendon as an ex-soldier who during World War I conducted American

troops on the French front and was awarded a medal for it. Nevertheless, McLendon's tendency to react to desperation through violence requires further examination.

The deep moral difference between McLendon and Hawkshaw - naturally disposed to defend Will Mayes by saying the truth - makes them look "like men of different races" (Faulkner 1955, 329). The ex-soldier and the barber could appear to the reader of Calvin and Edwards like actors playing a role in the drama that God puts on the stage of the world by blinding some human beings and touching the heart of others. McLendon's overwhelming will to do evil makes him the perfect emblem of the individual languishing in the state of sin, as the two theologians meant it. Still, the reflections on destiny previously illustrated allow to give a more complex interpretation.

The oppressive hot weather that dominates the story and arouses people's aggressiveness is a very significant symbolic element. "It's this darn weather", a client of the barber shop says, "It's enough to make a man do anything" (327). The heat is a perfect example of what has been previously defined as the manifestations of destiny in the dynamics of nature inside and outside the human beings. It is a natural circumstance external to the human beings and, at the same time, it is a stimulus inside them. Human beings make choices and act starting from this circumstance and stimulus. Just like the heat oppresses each single character in the tale, there is no human being who can avoid the influence of circumstances and natural impulses, especially those leading to violence. The symbolic heat seems to exert its spell even on Hawkshaw, who instinctively hits the panic-stricken Will Mayes when he hits him by mistake. Nevertheless, while Hawkshaw's violent instincts prove to be controllable, McLendon's seems to be so overwhelming that they make him what he is and guide his actions.

McLendon's violent temperament induces him to distort reality by turning a rumour into a story allowing him to vent his aggressiveness and, at the same time, legitimize it. Indeed, he does not simply take for granted that the rumour about Will Mayes is truthful: he exaggerates it up to the point where he assumes that the man is a rapist. This mystification is carried out by the ex-soldier thanks to the contribution of the men surrounding him, especially Butch and another client of the barber shop who, like McLendon, seem to be particularly oppressed by the hot weather. Even those who in the beginning had doubts about Will Mayes' guilt become convinced of it. All the murderers end up believing in the lie they have woven by deceiving each other, because this allows them to vent a need for violence that is both personal and collective. The dust that saturates the air in the episode of the murder and in the end swallows the car driven by McLendon probably alludes to the obfuscation of the killer's lucidity about objective reality. Sometimes the dust seems to acquire a sort of cosmic dimension: "The dust [...] hung for a while, but soon the eternal dust absorbed it again" (Faulkner 1955, 335).

With the exception of Hawkshaw, no member of the white community of Jackson opposes or denounces Will Mayes' murder, even though everyone seems to doubt the veracity of the rumor that causes his death. Such behaviour can be explained in the light of what Sigmund Freud writes in "Dostoevsky and Parricide". According to Freud, "Dostoevsky's sympathy for the criminal [...] goes far beyond the pity which the unhappy wretch has a right to". It seems like a sort of 'holy awe'. This is probably due to the fact that every community has in itself a certain rate of violence that someone must vent. By committing the crime everyone wanted to commit, the criminal takes the burden of the community's guilt upon himself, becoming the scapegoat and redeemer (Freud 1997, 247-8). It happens differently in "Dry September": McLendon effectively gives voice to a collective need for violence but it is the victim who becomes a scapegoat, while the murderer becomes a hero thanks to the mystification that he carried out and the collectivity supported. As a consequence, since the criminal is not found guilty nor condemned, there is no redemption for anyone.

As hinted before, McLendon's old bond with war is very significant. If in the past, in war he found a legitimate outlet for relieving his violent instincts, the end of the conflict and the loss of his role of soldier make him no longer able to legitimately vent his drives. Moreover, if war granted him a role and a lifestyle that were congenial to his way of being, in peace time he experiences the disorientation deriving from the loss of a defined social identity and function recognized by the collectivity. Will Mayes' demonization and his sacrifice allow the ex-soldier to acquire a 'useful' collective function again by becoming a 'guarantor' of justice and order. Obviously, McLendon's delusions do not modify the truth: the aggressiveness guiding his actions is the fruit of his desperation and, as a consequence, it cannot be channelled into any gesture rendering it significant and pacifying it. This is confirmed by the episode in which, after claiming to be the defender of women, once back home the ex-soldier shows to exert constant physical and psychological violence on his wife. At the end of the story, he remains alone, trapped in a cramped house compared to a "birdcage" and "almost as small" (Faulkner 1955, 337). Panting and furiously wiping away his sweat, he looks at the infernal world extending beyond his porch, a gloomy projection of his spiritual condition.

Minnie Cooper likewise lives in a condition of deep desperation, the consequences of which are different from those of McLendon's. Minnie experiences a double conflict with herself and the people who surround her. Since she feels she cannot be accepted for what she is, she does not accept herself. This leads her to create a false image of herself that contrasts with the way other people see her and, most of all, with what she actually is. With the passage of time, this conflict intensifies but, since she is made desperate by her inability to overcome it, Minnie delves into it, going through a process of self-destruction.

As Greek tragedy testifies, reality is marked by a series of 'opposites' that in the finitude of human existence tend to clash with each other, threatening the individual's psychic balance and sometimes destroying it. This can be clearly noticed in moral conflicts and psychopathological disruptions (Tillich 1965, 61). According to Tillich, one of the main conflicts usually experienced by the human being is the conflict between dynamics and form. Human existence is dynamic but it spontaneously creates and takes on forms allowing it to resist chaos and non-being. Still, these forms tend to become a constraint for existence and inhibit its vitality. They are creations and institutions of individual, social, cultural, and religious nature in which human dynamism actualizes itself but, when they become stable, they threaten dynamism itself. The human being is anxious both about the possibility of a final form and about the possibility of a total absence of form. Indeed, the former would repress its vitality while the latter would result in complete chaos. As a consequence, the human being normally experiences a constant swinging between form and dynamics, but the loss of one of the two polarities can make the other destructive. In particular, when a form abstracted from the dynamics that produced it is imposed on the dynamics to which it does not belong, the individual perceives it as an oppressive external constraint. Such imposition can engender a condition of paralysis or a rebellion of dynamics that provokes chaos and sometimes, in reaction, stronger forms of repression (64-6). Minnie herself takes on a form that is a cultural product under the delusion that this will allow her to avoid the experience of not being accepted by the society in which she lives. But, as the woman changes, the form she identifies with narrows, becoming more and more oppressive until finally provoking a breaking point and a crisis.

As Edmund L. Volpe explains in "'Dry September'. A Metaphor for Despair" (1989), in the period when the story is set, society assigns women a limited number of codified roles related to their social condition and to the different stages of their life. Women from middle and upper classes must be able to 'play' two main roles: before marrying they must be attractive and adhere to precise stereotypes of reserve and femininity in order to find a husband; after their marriage, they become mothers and must devote their life to their family by accomplishing a certain number of tasks. An unmarried mature woman cannot perform the only function that society assigns to her and is consequently judged as a failure. That is Minnie's case: in spite of having been, in her youth, more attractive and popular than other girls of her same age, at "thirty-eight or thirty-nine" (Faulkner 1955, 330) she is still unmarried. Since the social pressures she suffers make the idea of a definitive failure unbearable to her, she still needs to think of herself as a woman who is young and beautiful enough to arouse interest in men. This attitude leads her to remain in the first of the two stages previously illustrated. In other words, her "image of her-

self has been arrested at the pre-marital stage" (Volpe 1989, 62-3). That is the reason why she takes so much care of her appearance and asks the daughters of her female friends to call her "cousin" instead of "aunty" (Faulkner 1955, 331).

When Minnie starts to realize her situation, she begins to wear a mask that she exhibits to other people and to herself: "her face began to wear that bright, haggard look. She still carried it to parties on shadowy porticoes and summer lawns, like a mask or a flag, with that bafflement of furious repudiation of truth in her eyes" (331). Nevertheless, in spite of her constant denial of her condition, "Minnie's bright dresses, her idle and empty days, had a quality of furious unreality" (331). Indeed, in spite of her being detached from reality, Minnie cannot completely overlook her natural ageing, the growth of her little 'cousins', the indifference of the men she comes across in the streets, the pitiful and derisive attitude held by the people surrounding her. The contrast between all these aspects and her image of herself (as well as her consequent behaviour) make her situation so grotesque that she tries to escape it through alcohol. In the end, led by the need to keep her delusions alive, Minnie invents, misunderstands, or imagines having been "scared" by Will Mayes and puts into circulation a rumour that allows her to win the attention she desires at the price of his life.

Will Mayes' destiny does not seem to be a source of worry for Minnie. The night when the murder is committed, she wears a new dress in order to go to the cinema with her girlfriends. The perspective of making her appearance in the main square of the town raises a feverish excitement in her. Such excitement turns into inner exaltation when she realizes that the men in the square welcome her with "suddenly ceased voices, deferent, protective" and even with interest: "the young men lounging in the doorway tipped their hats and followed with their eyes the motion of her hips and legs when she passed". When, in the movie theater, among "turning faces" and "undertones of low astonishments" (336), Minnie sits in front of the screen in motion, her exultation provokes a stimulus to laugh that she tries to stifle. But, in spite of her efforts to restrain herself, the malaise that underlies the violence of her feelings makes her burst into compulsive laughter and screams. This crisis could be the result of a sudden epiphany, arising from the contrast between the flowing of the images on the screen – probably a symbol of Minnie's dreams – and the silhouette of the young couples standing out against it – images of the happy condition she has lost.<sup>3</sup>

3 The connection between Minnie's dreams and the movie screen has been pointed out by several critics. For example, cf. Paul Rogalus (1990), "Faulkner's 'Dry September'"; Arthur L. Ford (1962) "Dust and Dreams. A Study of Faulkner's 'Dry September'"; William B. Bache (1954), "Moral Awareness in 'Dry September'".

There is a clear relation between the image of the cinema and the image of the dust. Minnie's and McLendon's delusions, the artificial constructions through which they manipulate reality, have the same origin. They are the outcome of the main manifestation of the character's alienation from reality: their refusal to accept reality as it is and their will to modify it according to their personal desires as well as their need to satisfy them. What we are not given to know is to what extent this process is conscious.

The instincts of violence harboured by Jefferson's white community do not manifest themselves just in the attitude of tacit complicity held by people towards Will Mayes' murderers. Such instincts also underlie the behaviour of the women surrounding Minnie. Since in the past they have been less popular than her, and since they have learned "the pleasure of [...] retaliation" (Faulkner 1955, 331), the other women tend to underline the negative character of Minnie's condition of unmarried woman and, indirectly, to favor her gradual descent into her personal hell. Moreover, when in reaction to the pressures she suffers Minnie says she had been scared by Will Mayes, her friends pander to her and encourage her to lie even though they doubt the veracity of her words. The women's behaviour clearly demonstrates that the hell described in the short story is not just 'personal'. It has a collective dimension as well. "Dry September"'s hell is the fruit of a long and articulate chain where cruelty and selfishness engender suffering that, in turn, engenders new cruelty, selfishness, and suffering, thereby nourishing a potentially infinite process.

The moon shining above this infernal world is a faraway and ambiguous presence: "Below the east was a rumor of the twice-waxed moon" (332). When its light becomes more intense, it takes the form of a "wan hemorrhage" that is filtered by the dust in the air and gives it a silvery colour, turning the atmosphere into a sort of "bowl of molten lead" (333). Even when the moon rises high in the sky, shedding light on the entire town, its light reaches the planet only through the dust: "The moon was higher, riding high and clear of the dust at last, and after a while the town began to glare beneath the dust" (335). This makes the celestial body appear very far and indifferent, as the closing sentence clearly states: "The dark world seemed to lie stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars" (338).

The image of the moon probably alludes to the possible existence of another reality that transcends the suffering, the hate, and the divisions dominating the fallen world described in the story. Still, this reality proves to be totally alien to the characters' lives. Meant as a symbol of love and reunification - both felt to be unreachable ideals - the moon might evoke the figure of Christ, twice fleetingly mentioned in the story. His name resounds in the exclamation "Jees Christ, Jees Christ" (330) whispered by one of the barbers in the beginning of the first section and is again pronounced by an undefined voice in the middle of the third section, the section of the murder: "Christ! - A voice said" (333). Will Mayes is the only

character in the story who is somehow remindful of the figure of Christ, both for his role of a sacrificed innocent and because, as a watchman at an ice plant, he is the only person to escape the oppressive heat of September. Nevertheless, he is the victim of a sacrifice that implies no resurrection or redemption. Indeed he curses his killers: "The others stuck him with random blows [...] and he whirled and cursed them" (334). If any hope is suggested in the story, it probably lies in Hawkshaw's good intentions. Even though ineffective, they express the author's confidence in the possibility of a moral redemption for the human being.

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