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Continuity through Imagery: The Dust of Yoknapatawpha

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Kiel Basford

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Kiel Basford

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

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acceptance of this thesis.

**Eric Haralson – Thesis Advisor
Associate Professor of English**

**Celia Marshik – Second Reader
Associate Professor of English**

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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Kiel Basford

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The most innovative of Faulkner's contributions to American literature is the creation of the fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner called it his "apocryphal county," and gave it a geographic location based on the real Lafayette County and a history that spanned from the arrival of the first white settlers at the end of the 18th Century to the time contemporary with Faulkner's death in 1962. In the middle of that time is the Civil War, a period of violent upheaval that remains at the center of Faulkner's fiction. It casts a shadow on all that comes after it, regardless of any actual connection to it through family lineage or historical knowledge on the part of the characters in his stories and novels. Faulkner uses particular recurring images, especially the image of dust, as a way to connect his narratives from the various points in their history to the downfall of the South in the Civil War. Through his use of dust, a profound level of intertextuality in the Yoknapatawpha works connects major themes, such as the origins and development of racism and the effect of industrialization on the moral code of the Old South.

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No work of Faulkner's is more obviously plagued with mentions of dust than the short story, "Dry September." While the first two of the story's five sections contain no mention of dust, the third, which is under five pages in length, employs the word sixteen times. The third section is also the section in which the central action of the story takes place. Will Mayes, a black man falsely accused of sexually assaulting the spinster Minnie Cooper, is beaten, captured, and eventually lynched by a group of white men. Present in this section is a "stifling dust which completely permeates the action" (Ford 219). Dust is not used here as a simple background image to add to a detailed setting. It becomes a part of the story symbolizing death—be it in the form of the individual, Will Mayes, or in the larger form of a moral order in a corrupted society.

The narrative of the third section follows the barber, the ultimately ineffectual voice of reason of the group, as he jumps from the moving car containing Will Mayes and his captors: "The impetus hurled him crashing through dust-sheathed weeds, into the ditch. Dust puffed about him" and after some time the car returns, without Will Mayes, and passes the barber. He watches as "the dust swallowed them; the glare and the sound died away. The dust of them hung for a while, but soon the eternal dust absorbed it again" (*Stories* 179-180). The weight and repetition of the image contribute to the implication of Mayes's death. But Faulkner gives to dust a complexity that exceeds the function of a mere image; dust becomes something that has a will of its own. As such, Faulkner positions it as the thing acting rather than the thing being acted upon: it not only puffs and hangs in the air, as one would expect of dust, but swallows and absorbs, interacting with its environment seemingly of its own volition.

Faulkner keeps the meaning of dust symbolic rather than allegorical. It does not have a cut and dry reference; it is dynamic, and as such has numerous references that often intersect. These intersections are difficult to see in a single work, especially in a short story such as "Dry September." Its prevalence in the sections dealing with Will Mayes's lynching and its absence in the less eventful sections dealing with the unattractive spinster Minnie Cooper suggest a connection to violence and death. Some critics have accepted a more or less straightforward interpretation of the dust in "Dry September." James Ferguson suggests that "the hammerlike repetition of the word *dust*, with its connotations of death and sterility" constitutes it as a leitmotif (Ferguson 138). As a leitmotif, Ferguson argues that the image of dust is meant to contribute to the story's cohesion and to refer to the themes of death and sterility each time it is repeated. Sterility can be seen in nature through the extended drought and in Minnie Cooper's childlessness. But in neither of the two sections focusing on Minnie does the word dust appear. It is almost entirely, with one exception, contained within the third section, dealing with the lynching itself. In "Dry September," then, dust primarily refers to death, in one form or another, whereas that reference becomes blurred when dust is examined in other works, connecting themes while broadening its symbolic use.

An indication of the importance that Faulkner places on the word in "Dry September," the dust becomes a manifestation of death itself. In the beginning of the third section, Faulkner writes that "the day had died in a pall of dust" (CS 175). The dust itself seems to be immune to death, as it is when it is described it as "eternal," a characteristic it perhaps shares with death. But unlike death, dust can be an actual thing rather than the absence of a thing. Dust in Faulkner's fiction can exist in a living world

without the limitations of temporal life. As such, it would not do for “the glare and the sound” of the car with the lynch-mob to have *vanished* or *faded*; it had to have “died away” while the dust continued on, the physical presence of death itself.

Faulkner’s employment of the word likely has a broader application than is allowed for by the definition of a leitmotif. One critic questions whether “dust should be considered a leitmotif” on the grounds that it “functions on many levels in this story, and its strength as an image lies in this flexibility” (Skei 224). While its flexibility does seem to preclude it from rightly being called a leitmotif, simply thinking of it as an image is at least as limiting. A look at the use of the word not only in “Dry September,” but in the entirety of Faulkner’s oeuvre, reveals a complexity that defies categorization into a literary element that can be applied across the entirety of his works. This is not to say that dust does not often function merely as a symbol, motif, or image, but only that it should not be stereotyped as such, lest the reader relegate it to those terms when it is meant to be applied in a grander fashion. Faulkner’s use of the word changes significantly over his career and he made no effort to apply it uniformly throughout his works.

In no work of Faulkner’s does dust hold a more obvious significance than in “Dry September.” But this is largely due to the brevity of the story and the sheer concentration of the mentions of dust. He uses the word less and less frequently as time goes by, but this is more from Faulkner’s aversion to relying on base repetition than a movement away from focusing on dust as a unique physical characteristic of Yoknapatawpha County. A good measure of this change can be seen in the novels *Flags in the Dust* and *Intruder in the Dust*. The function of dust in each novel is important, and one need look no further

than the titles for verification of its significance. The former is his third novel and widely considered to be his first mature effort. Overall, the word is used in excess of sixty times, and to some extent Faulkner's frequent use of the word is a means to strengthen its importance. The latter novel, published nearly twenty years later, contains less than twenty instances of the word, but is no less insistent on the importance of the word. Faulkner's strategy for including dust in the narrative has become more conservative and sophisticated by the time he writes *Intruder in the Dust*, but it is the same dust, with the same broad symbolization of death and the passing of a way of life.

Still early in Faulkner's works is "A Rose for Emily." A common element that this story shares with "Dry September" is the focus on the propriety of an unmarried woman coming from the traditions of the Old South. In this case, the focus is on Miss Emily Grierson. While not prevalent throughout the story, the dust is as thick in the final paragraphs as it is in any point in "Dry September." The force of the townspeople breaking down the door to the room that had not been seen by anyone but Miss Grierson for forty years seems to fill it "with pervading dust" (CS 129). The narrative then goes on to describe all the things covered in dust: it lay "upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver" (CS 129-130). The attention Faulkner gives to the dust at the end of this story is comparable to the attention given to the discovery of Homer Barron's corpse. They are not altogether separated; the implication exists that the decayed matter of the forty year old corpse is the source of the dust. Death is here directly embodied by dust, a more concrete connection than anything seen in "Dry September."

More so than Minnie Cooper, Miss Emily Grierson is an anachronistic figure. A major theme in the story is the shift in social etiquette over the generations. This can be seen in the disparity between a young man and an older man at a meeting to decide what to do about the smell coming from the Grierson house, which they did not yet know was from the rotting corpse of Homer Barron. The younger man suggests to simply send someone to tell her to clean whatever smells. The older impetuously asks, “will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?” (CS 122). Thus ends the debate and the townspeople decide to sneak around her house at night throwing down lime. This slightly comic scene placates the older generation without quite espousing its peculiarities. As time goes by, Miss Emily becomes more and more isolated. She is described as passing “from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (CS 128). She carries the past with her, unflinching in the face of changing times. But from the perspective of the townspeople this is not seen as her being traditional or old fashioned; it is seen as perversion.

Miss Emily’s death is not the focus of the story; it is the requisite for it. The first line of the story looks back to “when Miss Emily Grierson died,” sparing the reader any suspense regarding her fate (CS 119). Nor is the importance of Homer Barron’s death connected in any way to the reader’s attachment to Homer Barron. He is barely a character; he is given no voice, very little description outside of that which is necessary to establish his social status, and is only depicted through the fleeting glances of the townspeople. His importance is only to give modern contrast to Miss Emily. The focus of the story lies, of course, in Miss Emily’s act of sleeping with Homer Barron’s corpse for so many years. The act is more important than the characters themselves. It shows

that the traditions of the Old South have been perverted, if not entirely destroyed, by the unalterable procession of time.

The remnants of these traditions exist as the thick covering of dust at the end of the story. Some verification for this can be found by exploring the title, in particular why Faulkner chose the word “rose” for a story in which no actual rose appears. But the word itself appears twice as a verb and twice as an adjective. Not coincidentally is dust the subject of the verb in its second occurrence: “a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs...” (CS 128). But the more significant instances are the latter two, in which the word “rose” appears as an adjective. The reader is more likely to think of an actual rose and derive some meaning from the title when coming across “the valence curtains of faded rose color” and “the rose-shaded lights” than when the word appears as a verb (CS 129). These rosy objects are covered in what Faulkner describes as an “acrid pall” of dust (CS 129). While the significance of this can be inferred from the text alone, Faulkner’s comments about the title of this story further clarify the connection between the dust and rose images: “the meaning [of the title] was, here was a woman who had had a tragedy, an irrevocable tragedy and nothing could be done about it, and I pitied her and this is a salute. . . to a woman you would hand a rose” (Jelliffe 71). Faulkner’s offering of a metaphorical rose is a gesture that defines Miss Emily as a woman of particular gentility. That all the numerous rose colors in Miss Emily’s room are covered with dust is an indication that the traditions of the Old South to which her gentility belongs are degraded and decomposed.

Faulkner’s spinster figures are appropriately characterized by dust because its dryness and association with death cohere to their typical sterility. Unlike Emily

Grierson, Minnie Cooper lacks any direct connection with dust. The dust in “Dry September” was entirely focused on men and their violent actions. But typically, Faulkner employs dust, as he does in “A Rose for Emily,” across gender lines, and the model of the childless spinster is often found wallowing in dust. Such is the state in which we find Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The opening of the novel finds Miss Coldfield sealed in her room during “the long still hot weary dead September afternoon” (AA 3), recalling the setting of “Dry September.” Accordingly, Miss Coldfield is surrounded by a fair amount of dust. In addition to the “dust motes” floating around, the novel’s opening paragraph ends with her focusing on “the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration,” that is, Thomas Sutpen, and through her speech evoking the image of him “out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust” (AA 3-4). The dust is victorious because Thomas Sutpen has no progeny and his decadent mansion sits on a ruined plantation, with Miss Coldfield remaining “doomed to spinsterhood” since ending their engagement. Rosa Coldfield is surrounded by dust for the same reason as Emily Grierson; she is a tainted vestige of the values and ways of the Old South.

Rosa Coldfield is one of many characters directly affected by Sutpen’s ambitions, while those indirectly affected number in the myriad characters chronicled elsewhere in Faulkner’s works. His property, claimed from wilderness, changes as time passes and functions as a backdrop for a number of other tales, such as “The Bear.” Sutpen’s story reaches far into the past and he ranks with the oldest plantation owners in Faulkner’s fiction. His plantation is depicted as the first act of creation in the Genesis of Yoknapatawpha County as he and his slaves seem to “overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently

out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down . . . creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*" (AA 4). This biblical allusion is meant to be applied roundly to the settling of Yoknapatawpha and the spirit with which its first settlers carved and divided the land. Typically with Faulkner's plantation owners, such as with the Compson and Sartoris families, each successive generation sees another step taken towards the downfall of the family. Sutpen is unique for having no progeny or legacy, which of course is a component of the tragedy. Still, his mark on Yoknapatawpha County runs as deep as any of the names that succeed through the generations. As such, Thomas Sutpen is the character in Faulkner's works that best serves as the microcosm for the downfall of the Old South.

Absalom, Absalom!, taking place many years after Sutpen's death, shows a great deal more dust in 1910, the time in which the novel itself is set, than it does in Sutpen's time, leading up to and immediately after the Civil War. One explanation for this is that Sutpen was among the first to disturb the dust from the earth so that it could accumulate over the decades. Rosa Coldfield's narration seems to suggest so. Among the few scenes depicting dust in earlier times, she describes Sutpen's carriage coming "in a thunder and a fury of wildeyed horses and of galloping and of dust" (AA 16). This imagery is soon after echoed: "the dust, the thunder, the carriage whirling up to the church door" (AA 17). The former mention of dust is given the greatest importance of what Rosa Coldfield calls "a fury." It could easily have been wildeyed horses galloping in dust, but it is specifically "a fury" of each of the components, with extra weight falling on "dust" as the final word of the sentence and, as it happens, the paragraph. The latter mention of dust recalls the

former, again with emphasis on the dust, as though it is something remarkable, something as new to Yoknapatawpha as Sutpen himself.

It should be noted that Rosa Coldfield's depiction of Thomas Sutpen is incredibly biased and that the other narrators depict Sutpen in different ways. But as a character, she is not aware of the connotations attached to dust as she surrounds Sutpen with clouds of it. The emphasis on dust in her rhetoric is Faulkner's. Nor is Rosa Coldfield in any way aware that the dust surrounding her carries the same connotations, carrying with it the mistakes of the older generation. Her audience is Quentin Compson, who also becomes her reluctant companion when venturing to Sutpen's old ruined plantation. Like Miss Rosa, Quentin is tainted by the dust raised by Sutpen years earlier. More than any of Faulkner's other characters, Quentin feels the sting of history and is affected by earlier times. Dust functions for Quentin just as it does for any other character; it is a mark of history that shows the degradation of the values and the persistence of the sins of the Old South. But his sensitivity towards history is reflected in the intensity of the dust.

Absalom, Absalom! features a passage that puts dust in the foreground and focuses on it and personifies it as a force that Quentin must contend with. No other passage in all of Faulkner's fiction so clearly demonstrates the significance of dust than the following, taking place as Quentin and Miss Rosa are setting off to find what lies in wait at Sutpen's Hundred:

. . . that evening, the twelve miles behind the fat mare in the moonless September dust, the trees along the road not rising soaring as trees should but squatting like huge fowl, their leaves ruffled and heavily separate like the feathers of panting fowls, heavy with sixty days of dust, the roadside

undergrowth coated with heat-vulcanised dust and, seen through the dustcloud in which the horse and buggy moved, appeared like masses stranding delicate and rigid and immobly upward at perpendicular's absolute in some old dead volcanic water refined to the oxygenless first principle of liquid, the dustcloud in which the buggy moved not blowing away because it had been raised by no wind and was supported by no air but evoked, materialised about them, instantaneous and eternal, cubic foot for cubic foot of dust to cubic foot for cubic foot of horse and buggy, peripatetic beneath the branch-shredded vistas of flat black fiercely and heavily starred sky, the dustcloud moving on, enclosing them with not threat exactly but maybe warning, bland, almost friendly, warning, as if to say, *Come on if you like. But I will get there first; accumulating ahead of you I will arrive first, lifting, sloping gently upward under hooves and wheels so that you will find no destination but will merely abrupt gently onto a plateau and a panorama of harmless and inscrutable night and there will be nothing for you to do but return and so I would advise you not to go, to turn back now and let what is, be;* he (Quentin) agreeing to this . . . (AA 143).

In this tremendous fragment of a sentence, the first mentions of dust should call to mind “Dry September,” exactly replicating the scenario of two rainless summer months effecting a ubiquitous atmosphere of dust. This works against the notion that the perpetrators of the lynching of Will Mayes in that story acted through some influence from the drought and the dust, since the same conditions exist here with no such effects

depicted. Rather than the dust affecting the townspeople, the townspeople's violent and racist actions are reflected in the oppressive and ubiquitous dust. It has the same function in this passage in *Absalom, Absalom!*. But the importance of this passage goes far beyond anything offered in "Dry September."

Dust tends to exhibit realistic properties in Faulkner's fiction, but in this passage it acts in an explicitly unrealistic way. The cloud of dust does not trail Quentin and Miss Rosa as would be expected, but occupies all the space around them. Nor is it created in any realistic manner; it is "raised by no wind and . . . supported by no air but evoked." In the same way is Thomas Sutpen "evoked" in the dust-filled room "as though by outraged recapitulation" at the beginning of the novel (AA 3). This is a direct connection between Thomas Sutpen and the dust that exists decades after his death. Especially from Miss Rosa's view, through whom Sutpen is largely known and connected to the time contemporary with Quentin, Sutpen's existence is relegated to what she perceives as his crimes: his violent seizure of the land, miscegenation, and, most significantly to Miss Rosa, his insistence on having a child before marriage. It is fitting that he would have a literal connection with the dust, as, for Miss Rosa, he is responsible for debasing the values of the Old South, as well as being himself a part of that way of life that is destroyed in the aftermath of the Civil War.

The most remarkable aspect of this passage is that the dust is given a voice. It is personified and further characterized as "almost friendly" but also as a "warning." It carries a confidence that seems to stem from its self-awareness as "eternal." Its message is that the journey Quentin and Miss Rosa are on is a pointless one because it, the dust, will precede them and taint whatever they will find. When the events of that night are

finally revealed at the end of the novel, Quentin recalls that he “could taste the dust” (AA 290). The meeting they have with Henry Sutpen, who returns to Sutpen’s Hundred to die after fleeing in exile for killing Charles Bon more than fifty years earlier, is anticlimactic. Quentin simply repeats asking him his name, why he came back, and how long he’s been there, to which Henry answers respectively, “*Henry Sutpen . . . To die . . . Four years*” (AA 298). In keeping with the dust’s warning, there is nothing left for them to do but to return. Quentin’s part in the story, aside from retelling what later happens to his roommate at Harvard, ends here.

The message of the dust is clearly heard by Quentin, who is immediately after the speech “agreeing with [it].” The dust’s voice could be seen then as Quentin’s personal reflection. Miss Rosa, throughout the novel, seems more or less oblivious to the dust. But Quentin seems to always be aware of its presence, especially at the crucial moments of embarking on the journey to Sutpen’s Hundred and then arriving at the destination, able to “taste and feel the dust of that breathless (rather, furnace-breathed) Mississippi September night” (AA 290). While the significance Faulkner places on the dust is not necessarily recognized any more by Quentin than it is by Miss Rosa, the substance of Quentin’s thoughts and actions are more accurately characterized by the dust than with most of Faulkner’s other characters. Quentin is the likely choice to perceive a message from the dust because he is most tormented by what dust represents: the downfall of the traditions and values of the Old South.

Quentin’s sensitivity to dust does not first occur in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The novel in which he is introduced, *The Sound and the Fury*, also shows a significant connection between Quentin and dust. Nothing as remarkable as Quentin perceiving a

warning from dust occurs in *The Sound and the Fury*, and a first reading of the novel would not likely mark dust as an image more significant than any other, but a closer examination shows Quentin's deep connection with dust as well as the importance of the image as a means for achieving continuity with Faulkner's other works. The novel, divided into four sections, is narrated in turn by each of the three Compson brothers, followed by a third person narrative for the concluding section. Throughout the novel, "dust" is used a modest eleven times. Ten of these occurrences are found in Quentin's section, while the one remaining is found in the final, third person section. Without examining the specific uses of dust, it can already be seen that Benjy and Jason, the other Compson brothers, do not notice or focus on dust at all, while Quentin seems very much aware of it.

Other images have been shown to carry a particular significance for Quentin. Most notably of these is Quentin's shadow. Quentin uses the word "shadow" in excess of fifty times, making it a more obviously important image than dust in the limited space of his section of the novel. Shadow imagery is heavy, for instance, in Quentin's reverie on his confrontation with Caddie about Dalton Ames. He remembers that "she went into the shadow" and the "shadows of things like dead things in stagnant water" (*SF* 157). Because Caddy goes into the shadow, she too becomes comparable to the "dead things in stagnant water," at least from Quentin's perspective. These shadows have been shown "to include all of Quentin's basic obsessions. . . as well as . . . the deterioration of the family—'dead things'—the traditions and attributes of a once distinguished family, drowned in the 'stagnant waters' of a heroic but now vanquished past and a decaying present" (Dauner 168). The shadows represent essentially the same aspects of the Old

South in a modern world as the dust. The difference is that the shadows more or less belong to Quentin; their significance diminishes in contexts in which he is absent. Dust is less personal, and as such maintains its significance throughout the variety of contexts employed in Yoknapatawpha County.

It is natural for dust and shadows to symbolize the same aspects, the difference being the specificity of the shadows as applied towards Quentin versus the ubiquitous nature of dust. The most immediate reference of the shadows is to Macbeth's soliloquy, which also provides the title of the novel:

Tomorrow, and 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. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.19-28)

Because of the heavy focus on shadows throughout Quentin's section, the notion of him as "a walking shadow" has garnered more attention than the "yesterdays" that have led him to a "dusty death." These are less explored in *The Sound and the Fury* than in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where we see Quentin being told of all the "yesterdays" and we can imagine, having read the former novel, that Quentin recognizes Henry Sutpen as a

success where he is a failure. Namely, Henry Sutpen kills his sister's suitor, Charles Bon, whom Henry could not tolerate due to the discovery that he was their half-brother and, perhaps more importantly to Henry, that he was part black. Quentin, on the other hand, is humiliated by his failed attempt to stop the relationship between his sister Caddy and Dalton Ames. *Absalom, Absalom!* adds the perspective of the "yesterdays" to which Quentin compares himself, and thereby enhances *The Sound and the Fury* and helps us understand his "dusty death."

The instances of dust in Quentin's section of the novel interact with the instances of shadows. Such is the case with the first appearance of the term "dust" in the novel: "I could see a smoke stack. I turned my back to it, tramping my shadow into the dust" (*SF* 112). The symbol of Quentin's personal death, his shadow, is being pushed into dust, the symbol for death that more broadly pertains to the Southern history in which Quentin was born too late to truly be included. Added to this is his action of turning away from the smoke stack. More common than Quentin is used to, a smoke stack is a sight reminiscent of the industrialized North and absent from the agricultural South. In turning his back to it and towards his shadow Quentin is demonstrating his loyalty to the Old South and relegating himself to its history, despite it being long since destroyed.

This pairing of images is repeated later on, towards the end of Quentin's section, while he is preparing for his suicide. He walks into his dormitory building, noticing the empty entrance, with "just the stairs curving up into shadows echoes of feet in the sad generations like light dust upon the shadows, my feet waking them like dust, lightly to settle again" (*SF* 171). At this point in the narrative, grammatical sense has broken down and the images themselves become all the more important for giving the most concrete

meaning to Quentin's desultory thoughts. Mentioned here are "sad generations," no doubt an allusion to his own aristocratic Southern ancestry, which is represented by the dust. A slight transformation has occurred between this and the previous instance of dust. Whereas Quentin is seen earlier "tramping [his] shadow into the dust," violently pushing his personal symbol of death into the impersonal, here, the dust somehow settles on the shadow. As he gets closer and closer to his death, he becomes integrated into the "sad generations," numbered as one among their dead.

Faulkner states in the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* that Quentin "loved death above all . . . loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death" (Cowley 637). No other character in all of Faulkner's fiction shares Quentin's grim fascination with the dead past, which is why he is the only one of the three Compson brothers to perceive dust on any significant level. While he may not be aware of its symbolic meaning, he focuses on it reflexively just as he uncontrollably flashes back to moments where he faces his sister's shattered honor. In this way Quentin is no different from any of Faulkner's characters; none comprehend the true significance of dust. Faulkner does not idolize the dead past as much as Quentin does. While he writes about it with a certain nostalgia, he is quick to focus on its most problematic aspects, such as the violence with which Sutpen and the other old plantation owners took control of the land.

The greatest problems of the Old South are slavery and the vehement racism found in the wake of the Civil War, something that Quentin largely ignores—or worse, espouses—in his romantic vision of the Old South. Accordingly, the dust, representing not only the downfall of the Old South but the accumulation and perseverance of its sins,

is prominent through the exploration of racial themes. No character better epitomizes racial turmoil than Joe Christmas does in *Light in August*. Never in this novel is dust imbued with such poignant and pervading meaning as found in *Absalom, Absalom!* or “Dry September.” It is more or less typical, but the character of Joe Christmas faces a unique struggle in the backdrop of race, providing an original context for interpreting the several instances in the narrative of dust appearing around him.

In one important passage, Joe Christmas exposes himself to a passerby: “He stood with his hands on his hips, naked, thighdeep in the dusty weeds, while the car came over the hill and approached, the lights full on him” (*LA* 108). The “dusty weeds” do not appear to be particularly significant, but the dust image is then repeated after the car, complete with a shrieking white woman, passes by: “[The car] was gone, sucking its dust and its light with it and behind it, sucking with it the white woman’s fading cry” (*LA* 108). The repetition of the word reinforces it as a meaningful image. Further, in this occurrence it is paired with “light,” which could be given a racial context, and “the white woman’s fading cry,” which is racially specific. This simply shows that Faulkner employs dust across racial lines and within the question of racial identity itself. The dust does not only refer to romantic Old South for aristocratic whites such as Quentin Compson, but to all its dispossessed people, perpetrators or victims, on any point of the racial spectrum.

Light in August by no means marks the first time that Faulkner uses dust in a symbolic way surrounding themes of race. It occurs even in his first novel, *Soldier’s Pay*. Speaking of a group of blacks travelling along a road, Faulkner writes that “slow dust rising veiled their passing, like Time” (*SP* 147). The simile compares dust with

capitalized “Time.” The association with race and time is something that Faulkner will develop thematically throughout his career. Michael Cobb writes that in Faulkner’s following novels, “the ideological terrain of racial assignment is circumscribed by deliberate manipulations of ‘time’ that are translated into a kind of ‘history’ that purports to belong distinctly to white *or* black people” (Cobb 141). The notion of two races identifying themselves with different but simultaneous and similarly localized histories is not as well-developed in *Soldier’s Pay* as it is in later novels, such as *Light in August*, but we can see those budding themes here connected with dust. That the dust obscures the passage of the group of blacks from the white protagonists’ perspective in a manner they perceive to be “like Time” is an indication of a different value of time applied to blacks. The importance of dust in Faulkner, here as well as in all of his later novels, is not restricted to any one theme, be it race or time, but in its ubiquitous simplicity serves as the connective tissue between them across Faulkner’s canon.

Some of the earliest instances of the association between dust and race in the fictional history of Yoknapatawpha occur in *The Unvanquished*. In it, Faulkner presents some of his most straightforward narrative that takes place during the Civil War. In the third section, titled “Raid,” the Sartorises are mindful of an ominous and slow-moving cloud of dust. Ringo, the Sartoris slave and childhood companion to Bayard Sartoris, takes a particular interest in the dust. As Bayard speaks to him, he notices that “Ringo was not listening; he was looking at the dust, and the wagon stopped now in the road with the horses’ heads hanging and our dust overtaking us again and the big dustcloud coming slow up in the west” (*Unvanquished* 82). Ringo’s fascination with the dust is indicative of his awareness of his place in the Sartoris family as merely a slave. The chaos that

takes place in the South during the Civil War very subtly represents an opportunity in Ringo's young mind to debase the authority that maintains his cultural inferiority.

Later in the novel, after learning about the abolition of slavery, Ringo tells Bayard, "I aint a nigger anymore. I done been abolished" (*Unvanquished* 199). He goes on to tell Bayard that a black man is likely to be elected Marshal of Jefferson. Bayard incredulously asks, "A nigger?" at hearing about a black man as an elected official, to which Ringo responds, "No. . . They aint no more niggers, in Jefferson nor nowhere else" (*Unvanquished* 199). Ringo's existential revelation imbues him with confidence, but the historical weight is undercut by Ringo still identifying Colonel Sartoris as "Marse John" (*Unvanquished* 199). Faulkner here identifies the disparity between the cultural hierarchy imposed on separate races and the label of slavery. While lost in thought at the sight of the dustcloud, we see a hint of the hope that comes to the surface when he hears about the abolition of slavery, but the dust, as much as it indicates radical changes to the Southern way of life, stands as a reminder of the continued exploitation of blacks that is to follow, and will persist longer than Faulkner's lifetime.

More racially charged than any other of Faulkner's novels is *Go Down, Moses*. In it he explores the relationships between blacks and whites, with particular focus on the descendants of Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin. "Pantaloon in Black," one of the interrelated stories that compose the novel, shows the black character Rider in mourning after his wife's death. As he makes his way from her funeral he comes to a road:

It was empty at this hour of Sunday evening . . . the pale, powder-light, powder dry dust of August from which the long week's marks of hoof and wheel had been blotted by the strolling and unhurried Sunday shoes, with

somewhere beneath them, vanished but not gone, fixed and held in the annealing dust, the narrow, splay-toed prints of his wife's bare feet where on Saturday afternoons she would walk to the commissary to buy their next week's supplies while he took his bath... (*GDM* 133).

Present in this passage, complimented by the memorable dust imagery, are themes that Faulkner applies to both the whites and black of Yoknapatawpha. The notion of being "vanished but not gone" can be taken from this context of a black man losing his wife and applied to the dissolution of the Old South in general—a description that we might expect applied to the Old South as it pertains to Quentin Compson, for example. The dust, with its symbolic meaning and employment as a means towards continuity, helps to connect Rider's personal experience to the broader Southern experience. It is also described as "annealing dust," and so is taken to preserve his wife's foot prints, her physical memory, tempered with the memory of the Old South that is held not necessarily by the inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha, but by the dust itself. The white experience and the black experience of the Old South, while wholly different, are connected through the dust, symbolizing equally the sins and suffering of the Old South's tarnished history.

The symbolic connection between blacks and whites is juxtaposed dramatically with their differing social positions. The second section of the story, told from the perspective of a white deputy sheriff, serves to depict this. The sheriff recounts how Rider reacts to his wife's death and his subsequent actions with definitive racism. He callously surmises, "them damn niggers . . . aint human" (*GDM* 149). Of the seven stories that comprise the novel, "Pantaloon in Black" is the furthest removed from the McCaslin lineage. As such its themes can be more directly applied to the South itself

without contributing in any significant way to the elaborate McCaslin lineage expounded upon in the other stories. This story is important to the narrative as a whole for showcasing the divide between the whites and blacks of Yoknapatawpha, typified in the deputy sheriff's vehement racism, while simultaneously maintaining their symbolic unison as successors of a destroyed culture.

Intruder in the Dust, the sequel to *Go Down, Moses*, also focuses on race as a major theme. Faulkner had trouble selecting a title for this novel, but he decided early on that the phrase "in the dust" would make up the latter portion (*Selected Letters* 264). Patrick Samway, in writing the introduction to the concordance of the novel, notes that the phrase "in the dust" is "used 3 times [throughout the novel] and in each case there is an association with blacks" (ix). One instance occurs as Charles and his Uncle Gavin drive down the highway, noticing the deserted fields, with "the paintless Negro cabins where on Monday morning in the dust of the grassless treeless yards halfnaked children should have been crawling and scabbling after broken cultivator wheels" (*Intruder* 144). Here there is indeed an "association with blacks." It presumes a sort of status quo in which black children should be rummaging through dust, insisting on a historical relationship with dust and the blacks existing in Yoknapatawpha. Compared to the instances of the phrase "in the dust" is the word "intruder," used only in the title. These facts suggest the significance not only of the latter part of the title, but of the association between blacks and the dust that by this time Faulkner has used widely throughout nearly all of his novels.

In her article, "Intruder in the Past," Lorie Watkins Fulton gives a thorough explanation of the various meanings and applications of dust employed in the novel.

Fulton goes beyond the phrase “in the dust” and looks at the broader usage of “dust” in all the contexts in which it is presented. She finds dust to be more of a metaphorical reference to the contemporary people’s relationship with the past than other terms she examines that one would expect be employed similarly, such as “dirt” (Fulton 66). The most interesting connection she makes, and one that is unique to this particular novel, is between dust and the jailhouse. Because Lucas Beauchamp, a black McCaslin descendant met earlier in *Go Down, Moses*, is locked in the jailhouse for the vast majority of the novel, the narrative tends to revolve around the jailhouse as it revolves around Lucas.

Fulton focuses on one passage in particular in which Faulkner writes, “the very bricks and stones [of the jailhouse] themselves held, not in solution but in suspension, intact and biding and potent and indestructible, the agonies and shames and griefs with which hearts long since unmarked and unremembered dust had strained and perhaps burst” (*Intruder* 49). Here we see the jailhouse functioning in conjunction with the dust in a way similar to how dust functions in other novels. In particular, the descriptive words “biding and potent and indestructible” have been applied to dust numerous times elsewhere in Faulkner’s fiction, especially in *Absalom, Absalom*. The jail and the dust function as a very general but pervasive theme that depicts the present ensnared in the past.

The connection between race and Faulkner’s use of dust as it manifests itself in his novels traces the development of racism in the South. Racial issues are of course prevalent in the Antebellum South, but they develop in a different direction after the war. This opinion can be seen in Faulkner’s essay, “Mississippi, 1954,” in which he mentions

a change over time in the Ku Klux Klan, describing the “old original one of the war’s chaotic and desperate end which, measured against the desperate times, was at least honest and serious in its desperate aim,” which gave way to “the later base one of the twenties whose only kinship to the old one was the old name” (Meriwether 19). Almost justifying the Ku Klux Klan in its origins, Faulkner depicts it as something that develops into the deplorable organization familiar to today’s readers. This is not to say that there is a moral value placed on the racism of the Antebellum South, but that there is a moral value that Faulkner places on the Antebellum South despite its racism. The effect that Faulkner shows through his fiction is that racism becomes more deplorable as the South is taken away from its moral center.

A great deal of the moral value of the Old South lay in its insistence upon the simplicity of life. In keeping with simplicity, morality, in the secular sense, is not thoroughly defined in Faulkner’s Old South, but somehow understood by its inhabitants. This morality is jeopardized by modernization, and its loss is symbolized in the dust. The most visible transformation of the Old South comes from such modernization, most notably the introduction of the automobile. The oldest inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha associate industrialization, often in the form of the automobile, with the loss of their traditional values. Never are they able to articulate this, but the sense is palpable in several of Faulkner’s works.

The first novel set in Yoknapatawpha, *Flags in the Dust*, prominently displays an automobile as something very new and different to the streets of Jefferson. It also introduces the Sartoris family, of whom the patriarch is modeled after Faulkner’s own great grandfather, a colonel in the Confederate Army. The novel, set several generations

after the romanticized exploits of Colonel John Sartoris, depicts a young Bayard Sartoris, home from the first World War, ideologically clashing with his grandfather, also named Bayard. The fundamental issues between them are represented by Bayard's car, which he drives as fast as he can wherever he goes. Old Bayard's opposition to automobiles is evident. As the president of the local bank, he "wont even lend the bank's money to a man that owns [a car]" (*Flags* 57). Old Bayard, whose own exploits were featured in *The Unvanquished* as an adolescent during the Civil War, is among the first characters in Faulkner's fiction to represent the older order, a part of a generation that can remember and clings to the antebellum South.

More than facilitating a generational rift, the car is a product of industrialization that represents a more drastic change, transcending the drama of a single family. David A. Davis writes, "Bayard's car epitomizes the changes taking place in the South following World War I as materialism, mechanization, and modernism congealed into an insoluble nexus" (Davis 420). It is fitting that Old Bayard is killed in his grandson's car, from a heart-attack during a near accident (*Flags* 353). The advent of the automobile in Yoknapatawpha is the most visible indication of the intrusion of the modern world into the traditions of the Old South. As Old Bayard dies, so does the community's strongest connection to the antebellum South. No better instrument exists for killing those traditions than the automobile as it roars past horse-drawn carriages, kicking up a significant amount of dust.

The dust in this novel has the same basic function as elsewhere; it is a symbol of the past, dead but still lingering in the present. In this early work of Faulkner's, the dust is scattered throughout and employed frequently. The significance of the term is apparent

when paying attention to its frequency of use, but the impact and weight placed on the word is less than in novels Faulkner later writes, such as *Absalom, Absalom!*. Still, isolated examples do subtly point to it as a significant and ominous image, particularly when it is associated with a car. Bayard's car itself is described as "dusty," shortly before he drives into the distance, leaving Old Bayard to watch as, "above the trees a cloud of dust rose into the azure afternoon and hung rosily in the sun, and a sound as of leashed thunder died muttering behind it" (*Flags* 82). The pastoral imagery of the "azure afternoon" is altered by the dust and juxtaposed with the car's "leashed thunder" in the distance. The dust serves as the evidence of the impact the car—or more broadly, industrialization—has on the simple small-town Southern way of life.

The connection between dust and modernization or industrialization made through the automobile never leaves Faulkner's fiction. In two other novels dust is seen billowing from under a car, one of which, *The Reivers*, marks Faulkner's final novel. In it, the protagonists drive down the town road in a stolen car, with their "dust spurting and coiling behind [them]" (*Reivers* 59). Later in the novel, the road itself is described as a "dusty gash" (*Reivers* 80). But when they reach the highway to Memphis, far away from their hometown, the dust becomes central:

We could see for miles; much closer than that was a rapid and mounting cloud of dust like a portent, a promise. It was indubitable, travelling that fast and that much of it; we were not even surprised when it contained an automobile; we passed each other, commingling our dust into one giant cloud like a pillar, a signpost raised and set to cover the land with the adumbration of the future: the antlike to and fro, the incurable down-

payment itch-foot; the mechanised, the mobilised, the inescapable destiny of America (*Reivers* 94).

Here we see many of the themes that occupy *Flags in the Dust* again interacting with dust imagery. But never in that novel does dust take such a prominent point of focus in the narrative. Here the dust serves a more direct purpose, in conjunction with more direct themes; it is the “signpost,” directly signifying a “mechanised” and “mobilised” America. With more than thirty years between writing *Flags in the Dust* and *The Reivers*, much has changed in the way of presentation, but little has changed in the themes presented.

Slightly evolved from the “eternal” and “biding” dust already seen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the dust in *The Reivers* has a connection with fate. It may be easy to forget while reading *The Reivers* that the narrative is speaking of events long since passed. The subtitle to the novel, “A Reminiscence,” is a constant reminder of this. It is normal for Faulkner to look back years or even decades when constructing the settings for his novels, but here it is not just the author but the narrator, Lucius Priest, that is looking back over two generations to the first decade of the twentieth century. Having such a perspective allows Lucius to view the dust-cloud created by the two cars remotely and elaborates on the image that he knows his audience will find commonplace, but that at the time was significant and novel. His observation of the change that has taken place across the landscape gives the dust a sense of fate while it maintains the meaning expounded upon in Faulkner’s earlier works.

Thematically connected to *The Reivers* is *The Town* through its use of the automobile as an indication of the Old South’s industrialization. It is Manfred De Spain’s car, a red E.M.F. Roadster and the “first real automobile” in Jefferson that takes

the limelight (*Snopes* 362). The novel shares a large amount of characters and events with other novels. Old Bayard is present, and is shown helping to pass an ultimately unenforced “edict that no gasoline-propelled vehicle should ever operate on the streets of Jefferson” (*Snopes* 360). By ignoring that edict and successfully running for mayor, Manfred De Spain begins to usher in a new era in Jefferson, one that paves the way for the widespread use of the automobile that Lucius Priest sees as a matter of fate in *The Reivers*. And like the other novels, the automobile here is seen on occasion “towing a cloud of yellow dust along the road” (*Snopes* 601). The themes are consistent between the novels; the automobile is visibly encroaching on a dying way of life that is represented in the dust.

Unlike the other novels, *The Town* is a part of a trilogy that composes the most extensive chronicle of Yoknapatawpha County in Faulkner’s oeuvre. The automobile and the themes of mechanization and modernization are given their space in *The Town*, the second part of the trilogy, but the themes accompanying the automobile are, while related, generally overshadowed by those continuing from and into the other novels of the trilogy, *The Hamlet* and *The Mansion*. The focus of the trilogy is on the Snopes family, in particular on Flem Snopes. Among locally renowned families such as the Sartorises and Compsons, the Snopes family seems to spontaneously appear during the Civil War, rising as the other families fall from their respected place in the social hierarchy. Cleanth Brooks said, “One could . . . argue that Faulkner’s most pertinent account of the fall of the Old South is set forth in his story of the rise of the Snopes Clan” (Brooks 307). It follows that the Snopeses always benefit, and are never hindered, by the ever accumulating dust.

The first book in the trilogy, *The Hamlet*, opens with a description of Frenchman's Bend and the Old Frenchman's place that is to be merely a rung in Flem's ladder. The "Old Frenchman" who built the place is long gone by the time the events of *The Hamlet* unfold, "his dream and his pride now dust with the lost dust of his anonymous bones" (*Snopes* 8). It is the settling of this dust, the original dust of Frenchman's Bend, that allows for Flem's prodigious climb up the ranks of the social ladder of the South destroyed by the Civil War. Flem's weapon of choice in his ascent is law. He is always taking advantage of the terms of one agreement or another, often taking advantage of characters who are bound to the law by necessity but accustomed to a code of honor that Flem disregards completely.

Faulkner demonstrates Flem's wiles throughout the trilogy, but one instance stands out among them all: Flem's deal with the devil. This episode is a humorous but profound look at Flem's shrewdness and ruthlessness. Flem loans the devil, referred to as "The Prince," which shrivels up into "a dried-up smear." When Flem shows up to reclaim it, Hell has nothing to give him. The Prince orders to have him removed, but his subordinates reply, "How? He's got the law" (*Snopes* 144-147). The episode ends with the Prince helpless, making promises of Paradise that he can't fulfill. Faulkner's social commentary here lies in the notion that Hell is governed by law, perfectly reflecting Flem's character. With a strictly mandated law in place, the governing of action does not require moral conduct. Characters in Faulkner's works that represent the Old South are governed by a code of honor and gentility. Flem's manipulation of the law allows him to trample through the dusty remains of the Old South and usurp the power and privilege that prior to 1865 would never have been within his reach.

Seventeen years passed between the publication of *The Hamlet* and the second installment of the trilogy, *The Town*. In that time, Faulkner refined the symbolic connection between Flem's rise and the ever-present dust. In *The Town* and throughout *The Mansion*, Faulkner uses variations of the phrase 'waiting for the dust to settle' in connection to Flem. It first occurs after Flem plants moonshine in Montgomery Ward Snopes's store to get him arrested, to Flem's benefit. Ratliff says about him, "He may kind of hang around until middle of the afternoon, to kind of give the dust a chance to settle. But he'll be back then" (*Snopes* 502). Another occurrence, again narrated by Ratliff, recalls the events at the end of *The Hamlet*: "Flem come back from Texas with them paint ponies and when the dust finally settled, me and Henry Armstid had done bought that Old Frenchman place from Flem" (*Snopes* 547). Each instance marks Flem's social advancement, and the phrase only occurs in similar circumstances.

Flem's greatest advancement is achieved through his wife's suicide. In one fell swoop, he implicitly forces the departure of Manfred DeSpain, the man his wife had been sleeping with for years with full knowledge of the townspeople; he becomes president of the local bank, succeeding the same man sleeping with his wife; he moves into the biggest house in Jefferson that previously belonged to, again, Manfred DeSpain; and he secures for himself the inheritance from Will Varner. It should not go unnoticed that Flem's triumphs over DeSpain are largely symbolic, as DeSpain was the last name of the Old South that held a position of respectability or power left in Jefferson. It comes as no surprise that the narration surrounding these events includes a significant amount of dust waiting to settle.

First, Ratliff: “So you would a thought that the first thing [Flem] would do soon as the dust settled after that funeral would be to get [Linda] clean out of Jefferson and as far away as he could have suh-jested into her mind she wanted to go. But not him” (*Snopes* 651). When the dust does settle, Flem finds himself in the highest strata of Southern society, and begins to work towards his final goal, one that he never fully realizes, achieving the respect of the townspeople. To do this, to play the part of a community leader recently bereft of his wife, he commissions a statue made in her image, forcing his daughter to stay in town and mourn in public view. Touching on this is a second passage containing the same phrase that comes from Charles Mallison, who strangely assumes Flem’s voice, giving the passage the appearance of a first person narrative:

My wife went to the beauty parlor for the first time in her life and that night shot herself carefully through the temple so as not to disarrange the new permanent, and when the dust finally settled sure enough that fornicating bank president had left town and now I was not only president of his bank but living in his house and you would have thought I wouldn’t need the daughter any more and she could go wherever the hell she wanted . . . Except I wouldn’t even let her do that until we could both sit in the car and see the monument over her mother’s grave unveiled (*Snopes* 859).

This is the last occurrence of the image of dust settling in the trilogy, and rightly so. It is the end of Flem’s rise. The rest of the novel focuses on Linda, Flem’s deceased wife’s daughter, and the revenge of Mink Snopes against Flem for the events taking place at the

end of *The Hamlet*. In these passages the phrase that the “dust settled” is a colloquialism, meaning simply that all is said in done. But in its more esoteric, Faulknerian sense, it refers to the values of the Old South being replaced, usually by the amorality of laws or contracts, as in the sale of the worthless Old Frenchman place to Ratliff (*Snopes* 547). In this way, using dust as a measure, Flem’s rise through the social order exactly parallels the dissolution of the code of honor and morality of the Old South. While the morality of the Old South is filled with its inherent problems, Faulkner depicts that value system being overruled by a system of law that turns morality against itself, fixing none of the inherent problems that still persist.

Everything that dust symbolizes throughout Faulkner’s canon is best personified in the character of Flem Snopes, and so it is fitting that Faulkner gave the image of dust a bit of specificity when applying it to Flem. No other character in all of his fiction is described as rising as dust settles. His relation to the image is similar to Quentin Compson’s relationship to the shadow image. The meaning and implications of the various appearances of shadows in Quentin’s section of *The Sound and the Fury* seem directed to Quentin’s own character, no further. On the other hand, the dust in Quentin’s section relates to a history of which Quentin is merely a part. Likewise with Flem; the image of the dust settling belongs to him, but the image of dust as a whole is far greater. The Snopes Trilogy is rife with imagery of dust that exceeds the limits of Flem Snopes. The best example comes towards the end of *The Town*:

They are all here, supine beneath you, stratified beneath you, stratified and superposed, osseous and durable with the frail dust and the phantoms—the rich alluvial river-bottom land of Issetibbeha, the wild Chickasaw king,

with his Negro slaves and his sister's son called Doom who murdered his way to the throne and, legend said . . . stole an entire steamboat and had it dragged intact eleven miles overland to convert into a palace proper to aggrandise his state; the same fat black rich plantation earth still synonymous of the proud fading white plantation names whether we—I mean of course they—ever actually owned a plantation or not: Sutpen and Sartoris and Compson and Edmonds and McCaslin and Beauchamp and Grenier and Habersham and Holston and Stevens and DeSpain, generals and governors and judges, soldiers and statesmen . . . (*Snopes* 662).

This is a remarkable passage for depicting the origins of Faulkner's South as simultaneously romantic and plagued by usurpation, exploitation, and cruelty. The history of the South is put into juxtaposition with the dust as "osseous and durable," implying a lasting quality of the dust despite it being "frail." Paired with the term "phantoms," the dust evokes the ghosts of all the names that follow, as well as their respectable positions, which, if held by a Snopes, is understood to lose respectability. There is a grand, mythic quality to the Chicasaw chief, Doom, who was already becoming dust while the subsequent names thrived, that in this trilogy are helpless to resist as Flem pushes them deeper into their fated eternity of dust.

It is necessary to maintain a closeness to Faulkner's texts in order to understand the unique ways he applies terms such as dust to the narrative itself, and solidify the connections between the stories and novels. It is no easy task, considering the breadth and sheer volume of Faulkner's works, to stay so close to the page. The desire to step back and view Faulkner's works all together in a panoramic view is inviting, and indeed

helps to reveal their magnitude and wholeness. But with that view in mind, it is important to re-immense one's self at the level of the page, where the connections begin to show purpose. In a prelude to *The Mansion*, one of Faulkner's last books, he calls his work a "living literature" (*Snopes* 677). If he is successful in that endeavor, it is on the level of the page that his work breathes. At the level of mere plot, Faulkner's fiction is intricate and immense, but at that level the dust is still something that can be swept away and disregarded. At a deeper level, the dust becomes history itself, the remnants of generations that have destroyed themselves, that have lost the spark of life that still exists in Faulkner's works.

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