That Evening Sun Study Guide

That Evening Sun by William Faulkner

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Introduction

William Faulkner's story "That Evening Sun" is the story of three children's reactions to an adult world that they do not fully understand. It is a dark portrait of white Southerners' indifference to the crippling fears of one of their black employees. It is also an exploration of terror, vengeance, and solitude. In the story, the African-American washerwoman Nancy fears that her common-law husband, Jesus, is seeking to murder her because she is pregnant with a white man's child. Published in 1931 in Faulkner's short-story collection *These 13*—the book that also includes Faulkner's most anthologized story, "A Rose For Emily"—"That Evening Sun" has become one of Faulkner's bestknown and most popular stories.

Author Biography

William Cuthbert Faulkner (family name originally Falkner) was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897. He was the oldest of four sons. His family was middle-class and descended from a man who became the model for one of Faulkner's own characters: his great-grandfather, Colonel William Clark Falkner, who commanded a Mississippi unit in the Civil War. Upon returning from the war, Colonel Falkner founded a railroad that his son later took over. His family's colorful history and its intersections with the history of the South proT vided Faulkner with models for such families as the Compsons.

Faulkner's family moved to Oxford when he was very young, and in Oxford Faulkner developed a love for the outdoors that comes out in much of his fiction. During World War I, Faulkner enlisted in the Canadian Air Force but never saw combat. Upon his return he began to write in earnest. For much of the 1920s, Faulkner wandered, moving from the University of Mississippi to New York to New Orleans to Europe and back to New Orleans. Faulkner published his first book, *The Marble Faun*, a collection of poems, in 1924. The book was named after one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's books and, like Ha(w)thorne, with its publication, Faulkner added a letter to his last name.

In 1926, Faulkner published his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*. Although the novel could hardly be called a success either artistically or financially, Faulkner's course was set. In 1929 he published *Sartoris*, his first novel set, like "That Evening Sun," in Yoknapatawpha. Others soon followed, including his masterpieces *The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, and Absalom, Absalom!*. Faulkner gained a great deal of critical recognition because of these works but never saw the financial success he craved. To that end he wrote two books, *Sanctuary and Requiem for a Nun*, whose sensational subject matter was intended to make them best-sellers and, he hoped, would tempt Hollywood to make movies from them. He also signed on with a Hollywood studio to write screenplays in the 1930s. Two of the famous movies to which he contributed are the film version of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* and the film version of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, both starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall.

Faulkner attempted to get a military commission during the Second World War but was unsuccessful. During the 1940s, Faulkner rededicated himself to the craft of fiction and produced two other masterpieces, *Go Down, Moses* and *The Hamlet*. Also in this decade, critical opinion of Faulkner changed drastically. The prominent critic Malcolm Cowley edited and, in 1946, published *The Portable Faulkner*, an anthology that drew from works throughout Faulkner's career. With the publication of this book, Faulkner quickly became regarded as America's greatest living writer. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949. In the years following the Nobel Prize, Faulkner continued to write and, in 1957, moved to Charlottesville to become the Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia. After completing his final work, the *Huckleberry Finn*-inspired *The Reivers*, Faulkner died of a heart attack in 1962.

Plot Summary

"That Evening Sun" opens as a reminiscence: the narrator, whose identity is unknown at first, reports that in Jefferson, "the streets are paved now, and the telephone and electric companies are cutting down more and more of the shade trees." The time is approximately the turn of the century. The narrator first introduces Nancy, a washerwoman who takes in laundry from white people around Jefferson. The narrator then mentions Jesus, suggests—but does not say—that he is Nancy's husband, and notes that "father told him to stay away from our house."

The story then shifts its focus to Nancy. The narrator tells of how he and his siblings would throw stones at Nancy's house to get her to make breakfast for them and tells the story of how Mr. Stovall refused to pay Nancy and beat her in the street. While in jail for this incident, Nancy attempts suicide by hanging but is cut down the by jailer and beaten again. The story then switches back to the present, and one listens to Jesus and Nancy snipe at each other. She is pregnant, and Jesus suggests that the baby isn't his, but the children do not understand what they are talking about. At this point the identity of the narrator becomes clear: Quentin Compson. As the story progresses, his father, Mr. Compson, forbids Jesus to come in the Compson house, and Nancy tells the children how Jesus left town, perhaps for Memphis. She is still afraid that he plans to attack her, however, suspecting that he may be in hiding.

Mrs. Compson, by Part II of the story, is getting impatient with the time that her family is spending with Nancy and with the extra favors that Nancy is asking. Nancy is feeling very apprehensive, but Caddy and Jason are unaware of why she is feeling this way—to Caddy, the change of routine is welcome, and Jason cares only about what personally affects him. Quentin's reactions to Nancy's plight are unstated—it is unclear whether or not he even understands the causes for the rift between Jesus and Nancy. In Part III, Nancy is visibly terrified and is making sounds of fear to herself; she cannot even swallow coffee from fear. After Mrs. Compson refuses her permission to sleep in the Compson house, Nancy brings the children to her house, hoping that the presence of white children will prevent Jesus from attacking her. The children go home with her, but her attempts to entertain them with stories and popcorn fail. Caddy is interested in the adventure, but Jason is impatient. Mr. Compson comes to the house to fetch the children. In the final part of the story, the children leave Nancy's house accompanied by their father and leave Nancy behind, paralyzed with fear. The narration leaves Nancy entirely as the children leave, and as Nancy prepares for death all the narrator chooses to report is Jason insisting that "I'm not a nigger" and Father scolding Caddy.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story starts with the narrator (whose name we do not learn until later in the story) comparing Monday morning in modern Jefferson to the Jefferson of his youth 15 years before. He starts by describing how Jefferson has been modernized with the addition of paved streets, power lines and the cutting down of trees. He also notes how laundry is now picked up and delivered by professionals in trucks or by "Negro" women who drive cars.

He then goes on to describe how the Negro women collected laundry 15 years before. The laundry would be bundled up and carried on the women's heads to their cabins in "Negro's Hollow" for washing.

The narrator then describes his how family's washing woman Nancy would carry their laundry on her head along with her cap. He also discusses her agility, which allows her to keep the bundle, balanced even as she walked or crawled through a gap in the fence. We also learn that while husbands often helped their wives, Nancy's husband Jesus did not. The narrator also notes that his father has told Jesus to stay away from their house even when Nancy was replacing their regular cook.

He then describes how he and his brother and sister would often have to fetch Nancy from her cabin while carefully avoiding Jesus, who is described as a "short black man, with a razor scar down his face." He relates one such incident in which the children roused Nancy by throwing rocks at her house.

When Nancy asks the children what they want, they tell her it is time to cook breakfast, and she refuses to come. They then speculate on her being drunk, which she denies. The narrator notes that the children believed it was alcohol until they witness Nancy being arrested. On the way to jail, Nancy is reported to have confronted a prominent white man named Stovall, whom she alleges has not paid her in three "times" (although the narrator is only a child, the reader is left in no doubt that the two are discussing prostitution).

After Nancy taunts him, Stovall kicks her in the face, knocking out her front teeth. Nancy is then said to have been noisy in jail until trying to hang herself with her dress in the early morning hours. The narrator describes how the jailer insists that Nancy is on cocaine, and tells how the jailer cut her down and then beat and whipped her. We also learn that Nancy is pregnant at this time, with "her belly already swelling out a little, like a little balloon."

We learn more about this pregnancy as the story progresses, and the narrator discusses how Jesus and Nancy have a discussion in the kitchen about whose vine the "watermelon" (her swelling abdomen) came off. When Nancy tells him to be quiet in

front of the children (the narrator's sister, Candace, interjects with questions and clearly does not understand their sexual innuendoes), Jesus talks about how white men visit his cabin and displace him. There is an inference in Jesus' words that the narrator's father ("Mr. Jason") may even be one of these white men. This is when, says the narrator, the father tells Jesus to stay away from their house.

With their regular cook, Dilsey, still sick, Nancy works for the family for some time. On one evening, the narrator (whose name, we learn, is "Quentin") goes to the kitchen to tell Nancy to go home and finds her sitting in the kitchen, afraid to go home. We learn that Jesus has left her, and that she is "scaired of the dark" according to Quentin's brother Jason. Much to the dismay of his wife, the father decides to walk Nancy home, along with his three children.

On the way home, Nancy talks about how Jesus has been good to her, and it becomes clear that she is actually afraid of Jesus. As she and the father speak, the children discuss an incident in which Jason had been scared on the path to the Negro section of town; apparently ignorant of the bigger issues the adults are discussing (although it is clear from his narration that Quentin is paying attention). Father asks if "Aunt Rachel," a woman who may or may not be Jesus' mother, could calm him down, and Nancy replies that Jesus believes he has the devil in him. When father says it is good that he is gone, Nancy replies that she knows Jesus is still around, and that he has plans to kill her.

In the next section of the story, Quentin describes how they walked Nancy home for several days and then made a place for her to stay in the kitchen. The children then hear noises in the middle of the night, and it becomes clear that Nancy is terrified. She is eventually allowed to sleep in the children's room, but she is clearly afraid for her life. Under questioning from the children, Nancy implies that God is about to punish her for her sins.

Following this incident Dilsey returns to the family, and Nancy comes to the kitchen once more in fear. She insists that Jesus has returned, and that she "can feel him laying yonder in that ditch." The children once more talk around the adults, discussing "niggers," before Jason asks Nancy if she is a nigger. Nancy replies that she is "hellborn," and that she will be going to Hell soon.

Dilsey makes Nancy coffee, which Nancy is too nervous to drink. Dilsey urges her to get the police involved, and tells Nancy that "Frony" (presumably Dilsey's husband) will stay at her cabin for protection. Nancy asks the children to let her stay, but their mother says no. Five-year-old Jason cries at her answer until he is threatened with a loss of dessert. Mother urges father to contact the police, but he counters that the police will do nothing.

At this point seven-year-old Candace interjects, expressing wonder at Nancy's fear and asking if wives are afraid of their husbands. Father offers to walk Nancy home, to which mother objects and the children are sent off. They tell Nancy to go home, and question her about Jesus. Dilsey says she will get "Versh" to walk Nancy home.

Nancy then talks to the children, inviting them to her cabin. Quentin objects, but eventually the group heads off toward Nancy's cabin. On the way, Nancy talks loudly and implies that father is along with them. The group sits in Nancy's house and Nancy tells them a story, briefly reemerging from her depression and fear before sinking back into it. The children then decide they want to leave, which Nancy tries to delay with popcorn and another story.

Nancy then places her hand in several hot places while turning up the lamp and building up the fire. Jason begins to cry, and Nancy attempts to calm him. The popcorn is burnt, and Jason threatens to "tell" on her for getting smoke in his eyes. Father then shows up to bring the children home.

He tells Nancy to go to Aunt Rachel's house. Nancy notes that Jesus is there, and that he has left a "sign" for her in the form of a bloody pig bone left in her cabin. She says she will be dead soon, which father ignores. The group then leaves, but Nancy appears not to notice and refuses to get up and bar the door of her cabin.

The story ends with Jason and Candace arguing about Jason being afraid of Jesus, and Quentin asking his father who will do their laundry once Nancy is gone.

Analysis

"That Evening Sun" is a dark tale about interracial prostitution in the south. The juxtaposition of themes of violence, sexuality and substance abuse with the innocence of childhood is one of the major themes of the story. Although they are aware that Nancy is involved in some kind of controversy with Mr. Stovall and her husband Jesus, they are blissfully unaware of the subtle details, and their childish banter during critical moments is disturbing to say the least.

Something that is also disturbing and is certainly something Faulkner was trying to draw attention to is the children's blithe acceptance of the inferiority of the Negroes. While this theme may not have been as evident when Faulkner wrote his story, today it serves as a jarring reminder of the historical injustices done to African Americans during the 1920s and 30s. Faulkner's depiction of the south may seem accepting of this society, especially when compared with today's acceptance and openness. However, at the time of publication, Faulkner's story served as a stinging slap at the miserable treatment African Americans received.

Another important juxtaposition is between the Nancy who is so strong and agile when balancing the laundry on her head and the one who is reduced to abject terror. This contradiction leads one to question just what strength is, and how you can be strong in one area of your life but not another.

One important symbol in the story is the darkness. Dark serves many different purposes in the story. On one hand, dark represents the difference between black and white. Nancy receives different treatment than would a white woman threatened by her husband, or a white woman who carried a white man's child. While a white woman

would receive police protection and community help to shame the father, Nancy is repeatedly beaten by Stovall and the jailer, and is left defenseless to await her abusive husband.

Darkness also symbolizes Jesus; Nancy is afraid to go home because he may be hidden by the dark of the lane to her house. This darkness also represents change, death and the unknown, and Nancy is being forced to confront these factors throughout the story. In response to these stimuli, Nancy begins to undergo a spiritual change; her attempted suicide and recovery become in a sense a "rebirth," and she must begin dealing with the new reality of a white child growing inside her. Her response to this challenge is fear and avoidance.

A related symbol in the story is that of the door, which frequently appears as an image in Faulkner's stories about the South. In the beginning of the story, the door represents an opening into Nancy's world of prostitution and sex. By the end of the story, the door comes to represent the entrance of evil, in the form of Jesus, and even though she claims to be afraid of dying, Nancy refuses to shut this door. This refusal signals the completion of her spiritual change and her willingness to move on into the future.

The road and the house are two other symbols in the story. The road represents a spiritual journey; Nancy must travel this road to confront her fear of Jesus, and to a lesser extent, Jason and the other children must walk on the road to conquer their own fear of the dark. The houses in the story represent security and safety, and this is especially illustrated by Nancy's story to the children about the Queen who must travel to her house and bar the door for safety.

Faulkner's tale of sex and violence may appear dark, but it is considered an accurate representation of the social customs of the time. The white Stovall does not face any consequences for fathering Nancy's child, whereas Nancy must face recriminations from both the white and African American communities.

Characters

Caddy Compson

Caddy is the middle child of the three Compson children of "That Evening Sun." She likes Nancy and can sense Nancy's fear, but is too young to understand what is frightening Nancy.

Candace Compson

See Caddy Compson

Jason Compson

At age five, Jason is the youngest of the Compson children. He is quite childish, and he is also selfcentered. He keeps repeating "I ain't a nigger" to Nancy, and she is especially worried he is only concerned about such matters as whether Dilsey will make him a chocolate cake. Like his mother, Jason represents the indifference of many white people to the problems of their black employees.

Quentin Compson

Quentin narrates the story. He is nine. We see very little of his personality come out in this story; of the three children, he speaks the least. Yet we do learn that he has the most responsibility of the Compson children, and is a quiet, thoughtful boy. Although he never lets us know this, he seems to understand what Nancy fears, unlike his siblings. He also is a main character in a number of other of Faulkner's works, most notably *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, in which he kills himself by throwing himself into the Charles River while enrolled at Harvard. In many ways, he is Faulkner's representation of himself.

Dilsey

Dilsey is the Compson's regular house servant. For much of the story, she is unable to perform her duties, and therefore Nancy must fill in for her.

Father

Mr. Compson, referred to as Father, is the father of the three children and is the patriarch of this important Jefferson family. He seems to have concern for Nancy but is convinced that her fears about Jesus' threat to her are unfounded.

Jesus

Jesus is Nancy's common-law husband. Unlike many of the other washerwomen's husbands, he never helps Nancy get the clothes. He also may be violent, and has a "razor scar down his face." He suspects that she is pregnant with another man's baby. Nancy fears that he wants to kill her, and Mr. Compson forbids his children to have any dealings with him.

Mother

Mrs. Compson, referred to as Mother, is the children's mother. She barely appears in the story, and is utterly unconcerned for Nancy. At one point, a terrified Nancy wants to sleep in the Compson house, perhaps even up in one of the children's rooms, but Mother feels that "I can't have Negroes sleeping in the bedrooms."

Nancy

Nancy is the main character of the story. She is an older African-American woman who makes a living by taking white peoples' laundry in. She is "tall, with a high, sad face sunken where her teeth were missing." Early in the story, while jailed for confronting Mr. Stovall, she attempts suicide but is revived.

Aunt Rachel

Aunt Rachel is a old black woman who lives in Jefferson. She may be Jesus' mother, but she does not always admit this. She is called "Aunt" Rachel because in the South white people often called older black women "Aunt" and older black men "Uncle." The excess familiarity was meant to remind black people of their inferior status.

Mr. Stovall

Mr. Stovall is a cashier in the bank in Jefferson and a deacon of the local Baptist church. He employs Nancy to do his laundry, but has not paid her for some time. When she confronts him, he knocks her down and kicks her in the mouth until the town marshal stops him. He is not punished for his actions; rather, Nancy is jailed.

Themes

Race Relations

The troubled race relations that have characterized the South throughout its history are the backdrop for "That Evening Sun," even if they are not the main concern of the story. Nancy, the main character in the story, is a typical African-American woman of the South in the Jim Crow era. "Jim Crow" was a name given to the system of laws, customs, and ideas by which the white South kept its black Southerners oppressed. In this era, which lasted from the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s until the relative success of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, black Southerners were denied most basic civil rights—including, but not limited to, the right to vote, to have a fair trial, and to have freedom of expression.

In addition, the Jim Crow system enabled white Southerners to take economic advantage of African Americans. Black Southerners did not have access to higher education, for the most part, but a few entered into the professions or succeeded in business. African Americans whose financial success became too obvious, however, were often the target of attacks by resentful whites.

But it was not only the successful black Southerners who were taken advantage of or attacked by whites. Nancy, in the story, is a washerwoman who takes in white peoples' laundry. Mr. Stovall, who represents both the economic system (he is a cashier at the bank) and the religious institutions (he is a Baptist deacon) of the South, refuses to pay Nancy for her services. When she confronts him, he knocks her down and kicks her repeatedly in the face, causing her to lose her teeth. Mr. Stovall is not punished; rather, it is Nancy who is imprisoned. Quentin does not tell the reader on what charge she is jailed. Faulkner, who was always concerned with race, comments through his maturing narrator on the willing blindness of Southerners to the injustices of their society.

Coming of Age

One of the most familiar themes in Western literature is the "coming of age" or "loss of innocence" theme. In such stories, a young man (or, less frequently, a young woman) moves from childhood to adulthood through vivid and affecting experiences. Such twentieth-century classics as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* are based on this theme. Faulkner also uses this theme, but he generally sets his characters' comings-of-age against a backdrop of declining families and a changing South.

In "That Evening Sun," Quentin Compson, the narrator, moves from childlike innocence toward a sadder but wiser adult experience in the course of the story. Faulkner's narration is quite clever. The story is actually narrated by an older Quentin, a man fifteen years beyond the nine-yearold child who seems to tell the story. But even though

the first voice of the narrator is that of an adult, a man with perspective on the events he describes, that voice soon reflects the world of a child, with the short attention span and limited vocabulary characteristic of children. Quentin rarely speaks in the story that dominates the action of "That Evening Sun," the story of Nancy and her fear of Jesus. Instead, the voices one hears the most are those of Jason, Caddy, and Nancy herself. Caddy, Quentin's younger sister, is excited to play along with the adventures that Nancy promises. Jason, the five-year-old, is utterly and solely concerned with himself. Quentin's feelings about the matters at hand are unexpressed.

It is this lack of expression that represents Quentin's growing maturity. Unlike Caddy and Jason, Quentin can sense that Nancy is feeling a very profound fear—and he has some idea of the source of that fear. Whereas Caddy and Jason see Nancy's troubles only as a sort of game that focuses on them—and Mrs. Compson feels essentially the same way—Quentin can sense a deeper feeling in Nancy, and he recognizes the potential danger that Jesus presents. Quentin's essential silence in this story represents his dawning understanding of evil in the outside world. Unlike Jason, Caddy, and his mother, he refuses to turn Nancy's plight into something that refers to himself. He is not yet old enough to disagree with his father on the right way to handle the problem, nor is he even old enough to explain to himself what is really happening, but the reporterlike tone of the story—one very similar to the tone used by Faulkner's contemporary Ernest Hemingway— belies the deep emotional effect that Nancy's terror is having on him.

Darkness and Violence

"I hate to see that evening sun go down," W. C. Handy's song "St. Louis Blues" says, because the singer's lover is no longer around. In the song, the singer's regret at sunset is because the darkness reminds her of her absent lover; however, for Nancy "that evening sun" represents the danger that her absent lover presents to her. Jesus—whose name is likely an ironic joke on Faulkner's part— represents danger and violence to Nancy, and he will wait until night has fallen to fall upon her. Jesus represents a stock figure in racist Southern folklore. He is the dangerous, violent black man who, after dark, attacks women with a knife or razor. In the Jim Crow era, in order to stir up prejudice against African Americans, newspapers and magazines played up, and often simply made up, crimes committed by black men against white women.

Style

Point of View and Narration

Quentin Compson, one of Faulkner's most memorable characters, narrates the story. In the story, he is a nine-year-old boy, but as a narrator he is twenty-four. Faulkner has Quentin narrate in both voices: the story begins in the voice of the adult Quentin, but soon switches to the voice of the younger Quentin. It is difficult to tell when the narrator reverts to his younger self, because much of the story is simply reported dialogue, but many of the sentences in the first part of the story are long and filled with adjectives and conjunctions. By Part II, the sentences are short, declarative, and often skip around conceptually, suggesting the mind of a young boy.

Later, however, the story begins to revert back, as the older Quentin seems to reflect on what this story has meant to his maturing process. In the sixth section, the voice again becomes more complicated and almost lyrical: "I couldn't see much where the moonlight and the shadows tangled," Quentin says at one point, and also speaks of "the sound that was not singing and not unsinging." Also, his unwillingness to face the real gravity of the situation is indicative of his greater maturity. As an adult narrator, he recognizes that readers will understand the importance of Nancy's fear, whereas a younger narrator would probably feel the need to tell the reader explicitly what was happening. Quentin's silence on the topic of why this story has been so significant to him is, paradoxically, the sign of his maturity.

Irony

Faulkner uses irony in a number of ways in this story. One of the most haunting uses of irony is the name of Nancy's tormentor, Jesus. In the version of the story that was printed in the magazine *The American Mercury* in March 1931, Faulkner had called this character "Jubah," but returned to his original name when the story was printed in the collection These 13. "Jesus" refers to the Christian savior, but ironically the Jesus who actually appears in the story poses a threat to Nancy. Faulkner intensifies the irony when the children hear Nancy moaning the name to herself: "'Jesus,' Nancy said. Like this: Jeeeeeeeeeesus, until the sound went out, like a match or a candle does." Although the children are too young to realize it, Nancy has "committed a sin" against Jesus, for she is pregnant by another man. But instead of forgiving her, this Jesus may be seeking vengeance against her. Some critics suggest that Nancy is a prostitute, deepening the identification between this Jesus and the Christian Jesus, for Jesus Christ also associated with prostitutes.

The title is also ironic. The phrase "That Evening Sun"—or, as it was titled in the *American Mercury* version, "That Evening Sun Go Down"— is taken from the first line of the well-known song "St. Louis Blues," by W. C. Handy. In this song, the singer dreads the coming of the night because evening reminds her of her absent lover. In Faulkner's

story, the darkness reminds Nancy of the same thing, but she is not missing him; rather, she fears that he is waiting to kill her.

Setting

"That Evening Sun" is set in Faulkner's familiar fictional town of Jefferson, in his invented Yoknapatawpha County, at the turn of the century— some critics suggest 1898 or 1899. William Faulkner was from Oxford, in northern Mississippi, and in most of his best-known fiction he constructs an elaborate fictional equivalent for his home. Oxford becomes "Jefferson," and in his works Faulkner traces the history of the town and its county from Indian days to the 1950s. Such families as the Compsons and such black residents as Dilsey recur throughout his work. Jefferson is a small Southern town, dominated by a few families and suffering from the aftereffects of slavery and the Civil War. Few writers have portrayed family life in the South as lovingly and humorously as Faulkner has, but at the same time few writers have examined with a more critical eye the poisonous legacy of slavery. In this story the reader sees the two collide, as the peaceful small town of Jefferson is shown to have a dark, frightening side that emerges after the sun goes down.

Historical Context

New Kinds of Narration

"That Evening Sun" is an example of the different kinds of narration that writers such as Faulkner pioneered. Although very traditional in comparison with some of Faulkner's other experiments— part of *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, is narrated by a mentally retarded boy who has no sense of the passage of time—the story makes use of a narrator whose voice and point of view change in the course of the story. Quentin Compson, the narrator of this story, starts the narration as a grown man (he is presumably twenty-four years old) but in the course of the story reverts back to his identity as the nine-year-old boy in the story. His sentences grow shorter, his vocabulary less devel oped, and his observations less insightful. The story is just as much about Quentin's growing understanding of the adult world as it is about Nancy's fears, and Quentin's narration presents a man who transports himself back into his own mind as it was fifteen years ago. Because of this, the reader understands Quentin's seeming lack of reaction to the events narrated better than he or she could, had the narrator been outside of Quentin's head.

Jim Crow

After the Civil War, Northern politicians and anti-slavery activists sought to transform the South through a process called Reconstruction. For more than a decade, the Federal government passed laws and Constitutional amendments aimed at giving African Americans in the South all of the rights and privileges of citizenship. In fact, many black lawmakers were elected from Southern districts. (Later, to discredit Reconstruction, white Southerners ridiculed those black lawmakers, and to this day some American schools teach that Reconstruction went too far and that the idea of competent black lawmakers in the 1870s was ludicrous.) But Reconstruction ended in 1877, and soon after all of the branches of the federal government acted in concert with the Southern states to roll back the gains that African Americans had seen during Reconstruction.

Although after Reconstruction the Constitution guaranteed them the right to vote and receive fair trials, black Southerners soon found that they fell under another, parallel system of legal regulation: Jim Crow. "Jim Crow" was the name given to the system of laws, customs, and ideas by which the white South kept black Southerners oppressed in the period after Reconstruction. It included literacy tests for voting, tolerance of lynching, the prevention of African Americans' access to many public facilities, and even the widespread activity of the Ku Klux Klan. Jim Crow persisted well into the 1960s, when the civil rights movement finally made inroads in the South. Yet even in the twenty-first century, in many parts of the South, some vestiges of semi-official racism remained.

Critical Overview

Faulkner is often considered to be America's greatest writer. His fame rests largely on his novels, which examined Southern society more closely than it had ever been examined before, but also relied on radical advances in narrative and fictional techniques. Awarded the Nobel Prize in 1949, Faulkner was a profound influence not only in the United States but also in Latin America, where such writers as Gabriel García Marquez have expressed their feelings that Faulkner is unparalleled.

Although most critical writing on Faulkner is primarily concerned with his novels, Faulkner's short stories are also frequent subjects for analysis. "That Evening Sun," "A Rose for Emily," and "The Bear" are his most famous stories. "That Evening Sun" first appeared in 1931 in the magazine *The American Mercury*, a very important journal that was edited at one time by the critic and writer H. L. Mencken. Its appearance in that journal indicates that Faulkner was already being taken seriously by the critics of his day.

Later that year, Faulkner included the story in his collection *These 13*. Most critics were impressed by the collection. Edward McDonald, in the Philadelphia *Record*, wrote that the stories in the collection display "their author's apparently inexhaustible literary resources . . . his haunting knowledge of the frustrations, the perversions, the imbecilities, in a word, the compulsions of all sorts which drive his men and women into behavior that swings distractedly from the uttermost in heroism to the uttermost in degradation." Robert Cantwell of the *New Republic* felt that the stories were "brilliantly written" and remarked specifically of "That Evening Sun" that "we see that the real story is not the written one of Nancy's foreboding, but the unexplained, unanalyzed condition of strain within the white family, the inner dissension, the battle for prestige that hampers the husband's attempt to help when he first feels that help is needed." But the eminent critic Lionel Trilling, writing in the *Nation*, was less enthusiastic, arguing that "despite the dramatic stress and portentousness of his work its implications are too frequently minor."

In 1950, Faulkner issued a volume of *Collected Stories* in which "That Evening Sun" was included. In the intervening nineteen years, Faulkner's reputation had grown immensely, and critics were largely united in their opinion that he was one of America's major writers. Some felt, however, that Faulkner was too preoccupied by the darker side of the human experience. William Peden, in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, wrote that Faulkner was "the most considerable twentieth-century writer of short fiction" and that "That Evening Sun" was one of his best stories. Peden regretted, however, that many of the stories in the anthology "serve only to illustrate the melancholy fact that even a very great writer can be very bad at times." *Time*, too, reported that Faulkner was "a writer of incomparable talents who has used and misused those talents superbly and recklessly."

Many later critics have read "That Evening Sun" not as a story in its own right, but primarily as an addition to the mythology of Yoknapatawpha County and the saga of the

Compson family, whose downfall is told in *The Sound and the Fury*. The man who is perhaps Faulkner's best reader and most prominent critic, Cleanth Brooks, writes that in the story,

the Compson children have already assumed the personality patterns that we shall find later. Though they are too young to fully understand Nancy's desperation, Caddy and Quentin at least respond to the Negro woman's terror with concerned curiosity and, insofar as they are capable, sympathy. Jason is already a wretched little complainer, interested neither in Nancy nor in his brother and sister." Another critic, James B. Carothers, sees the story in primarily historical and social terms, arguing that Nancy is figured as a "doomed victim of the racial, sexual, and economic matrices by which she is defined.

Other literary scholars have concerned themselves more with the formal aspects of the story, often pointing to Faulkner's use of narration as the heart of what the story is trying to convey. Hans Skei identifies the narration as the central point of the story, writing that "the discrepancy between the limited point of view of the child narrator and an experience beyond his comprehension is modified by the fact that the child has become an adult at the time of narration." Skei appreciates the "great sympathy and empathy" of the story. James Ferguson also notes the narration, writing that "those who argue that Quentin fails to understand the plight of Nancy misread the story. The increasing silence of the boy in the final scenes and his unforgettable culminating question, 'Who will do our washing now, Father?' suggest that Quentin does understand that that Jesus will murder Nancy."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Barnhisel holds a Ph.D. in English and American literature and currently teaches writing at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. He has written a number of entries and critical essays for Gale's Short Stories for Students series and has published articles on such writers as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. In the following essay he "examines how the pressures of history interact with the darker drives of each individual."

William Faulkner's fictional world of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, is one of the most familiar locales in all of world literature. The families who inhabit the county—the Sutpens, McCaslins, Snopeses, and Compsons, among others—have family lives more vivid and more well-documented than many real families. As in the South in which Faulkner himself grew up, in Yoknapatawpha the two dominant facts of life, even a century after they ceased to be, are slavery and the Civil War. The relations between black and white inhabitants of the county are always colored by the legacy of slavery, and the values and aspirations of the white citizens of the county are always understood in relation to "the War of Northern Aggression." But the weight of history is not Faulkner's only subject. Rather, Faulkner, perhaps better than any other American writer, examines how the pressures of history interact with the darker drives of each individual— drives for sex, violence, revenge, gain, selfishness.

Faulkner rarely hit upon a more effective combination of the dark side of history and of individual human drives than he did with "That Evening Sun." In this story, the two combine, and a young boy who is rapidly approaching maturity must puzzle together what is happening and what his own place in the impending tragedy might be. Faulkner's choice of narrators is crucial to the theme of the story, for had it been narrated by anyone besides Quentin, a boy on the cusp of understanding, the story would lose its ambiguity and its sense of a maturing awareness. Jason and Caddy simply do not understand the situation; Mr. Compson under stands the situation completely; Mrs. Compson dismisses it out of her selfishness and racism; Nancy is fixated on her own terror. But Quentin, from his unique perspective, gives the reader simply information, not interpretation, for the majority of the story. However, he is not the age he seems for most of the story: he is in fact fifteen years older, and although readers forget it quickly after the story begins, he is old enough to have interpretations and explanations for all of the events he narrates.

This ironic disjunction between what Quentin the twenty-four-year-old knows and what Quentin the nine-year-old narrates is at the heart of the story. In a sense, it is the past—the past's crushing weight, the past's legacy—that is the main theme of the story, as it often is with Faulkner. The weight of the past can be felt from the first words of the story: "Monday is no different from any other week day in Jefferson now." But for the narrator, the past was better. The story begins with a comparison of the dismal present with a happier past. The power lines and poles bear "clusters of bloated and ghostly and bloodless grapes" and the laundry in the city truck "flees apparitionlike behind alert and irritable elecT tric horns." The irony here is that the ordinary symbolic resonance of past

and present is reversed: in Jefferson today, the accouterments of modern life are like ghosts, and the past is alive and vital.

The story provides more than enough explanation for why the present is viewed in ghostly images, but there is one other reason that few, if any, critics have noted: in Faulkner's carefully constructed chronology of his characters' lives, Quentin is actually dead when he narrates this story. In the appendix to *Absalom, Absalom!*, another novel in which Quentin appears, Faulkner gives Quentin's birth date as 1891. If he is nine in this story, the story takes place in 1899 or 1900. Quentin dies by throwing himself into the Charles River in 1910, but this story must be narrated in 1914 or 1915 if he is looking back to the events of fifteen years before. Of course the present is ghostly, if the narrator himself is a ghost!

Ironic reversals characterize much of the story. Such names as Jesus and Jason are ironic—Jesus is a threatening character, and Jason, rather than being the brave captain of the Argo, is here a selfish child whose only desire is to gratify his desires. Even the title is ironic. "That Evening Sun" is part of a line from one of the most famous American songs, W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues." In this song, which was published in 1914, presumably the year in which Quentin is narrating, a woman laments that when the sun goes down she begins to feel melancholy because her lover is not around. But in this story, the setting of the sun brings strong emotions to Nancy not because she misses Jesus but because she fears his return. Handy's line "When that evening sun goes down" has found its way into any number of blues songs, American standards such as Harold Arlen's "Stormy Weather," and even a song by the Irish soul singer Van Morrison. Faulkner's use of W. C. Handy is even more signifi- cant in retrospect, because Handy is a central figure in the history of American music. By inventing ragtime and popularizing the blues form, Handy brought African-American musical traditions to the mainstream of American popular music for the first time. For decades, music has been the most integrated arena of American life; Handy almost singlehandedly brought that into being. Faulkner, writing seventeen years after Handy's song was published, used this symbol of integration to tell his story of profound physical and psychic segregation.

Segregation, the legacy of slavery, is the condition that produces most of the ironies Faulkner uses in "That Evening Sun." Segregation's ironies are cruel and bitter: Mr. Stovall's savage beating of Nancy lands her in jail, and when she is cut down from her suicide attempt she is beaten again. The irony of black-white sexual relations in the South always underpins the system of segregation, for sexual contact between white men and black women was common and, if not condoned, certainly tolerated, but sexual contact between black men and white women was a crime even more unspeakable than a black person murdering a white person. Nancy—though it is not clear whether the nineyear- old Quentin knows this—is pregnant by a white man, and this is the reason that Jesus leaves her and the reason she fears his wrath.

The central situation of the story, Nancy's terror at Jesus' threat, a situation that is itself a result of slavery and segregation (what in the South was not?) is treated only slightly ironically. The only real irony of that part of the story is the lack of understanding displayed by Jason and Caddy. Rather, Faulkner introduces the main plot of the story

with the very ideology of the South expressed in the clearest terms. After Jesus has left town and Nancy is sitting in the Compson kitchen, having already cleaned up, the Compson family is ready for her to go home. But rather than leaving, Nancy just says, "I ain't nothing but a nigger . . . it ain't none of my fault." It is not immediately clear why she has started to talk this way, but Mrs. Compson does not want to hear it, and once Mr. Compson decides to escort Nancy home she complains that she is really the one at risk.

As the story progresses, Nancy's fear becomes just another part of the Compson children's lives and of the Compson household. Jason separates the fear from himself, considering it an element of being black: "I ain't a nigger," he repeats. The noises she makes to herself—"it was like singing and it wasn't like singing," Quentin says—are meant to vent a little of that fear, but it is not enough: she must sleep upstairs with the children. When she is not allowed to do that any longer, she asks the children to come home with her, reasoning that Jesus would not attempt to kill her if there were white children in the house—such an action would merit an immediate lynching, one supposes.

Throughout this section the narration is utterly flat, reporting only what happens and interpreting nothing. Quentin reports every statement and reply of each conversation, just as a boy does. However, that very tone does hearken back to Hemingway's, as does the undertone of experience, understanding, and painful growth, which moves the reader to seek for a greater understanding underneath the flat reportage. Faulkner has provided that source of greater understanding already, however: Quentin's older consciousness.

Quentin's older consciousness comes out again at the end of the story—not in the voice itself, but in the structure, in what the narrator chooses to relate. The Compson family walks back to their house, leaving Nancy sitting by her fire, resigned to her fate. Mr. Compson urges her to put the bar up but she is simply apathetic; she will not even close her door, so sure is she that death will find her that night. The children are agitated: Caddy wants to know what is going to happen, while Jason repeats again that "I'm not a nigger." It is Quentin's voice, however, that echoes in the reader's head as the story ends: "Who will do our washing now, Father?" Mr. Compson cannot take any more actions than he has without upsetting the delicate racial balance of the Jim Crow South, and he knows that Nancy is in real danger. Quentin feels that Nancy will die that night, but like his mother his only concern is for the tasks she does for the family. Given the Hemingway- esque tone of the narration, this last line is delivered with a bitter irony—the Quentin of 1914 spits it out, realizing that in retrospect he sounds selfish, like Jason. He wonders what he would have done had he been in his father's place, musing on what remains the same in the South—the brutal reality of a system of segregation, neglect, and enforced racism—even as the outward trappings of his home grow gray and ghostly in the modern day of cars and electricity.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, Critical Essay on "That Evening Sun," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Jones discusses the dubious origin of "That Evening Sun," including changes made for its initial publication in American Mercury.

Critical Essay #3

The earliest reference to "That Evening Sun" is October 1930. Consequently, discussions of its origin frequently assume a 1930 composition date. It is possible, however, that Faulkner wrote this story and "A Justice" nearer to the time he began *The Sound and the Fury* —in the first half of 1928, possibly even before he began the novel. David Minter observes that although the evidence for this conclusion is circumstantial, it is compelling.

Many arguments placing "That Evening Sun" before *The Sound and the Fury* in chronological order focus on the characterizations of the children. Although Blotner does not claim proof of a prenovel date for the story, he does say that "That Evening Sun" "is the kind of story of the experiences of the Compson children which WF [William Faulkner] said S & F [*The Sound and the Fury*] developed from." In "That Evening Sun," Quentin lives to be older than he does in the novel. Further, the adult Quentin of "That Evening Sun" does not reflect his preoccupation with Caddy's virginity, his incessant suicidal thoughts, or his "obsessive inner voices." If composition of the three related texts followed in the order of "That Evening Sun," "A Justice," and *The Sound and the Fury*, then Quentin first appeared as a narrator in "That Evening Sun." Benjy does not appear in the story. Ferguson adds that the Dilsey character in the short story is perhaps "so passive and ineffectual" because she had not yet assumed the stronger role she has in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Other similarities also suggest that story and novel might have been written at about the same time. The story's description of the town in present time, including details of telephone poles and laundry trucks, seems more like the present time of *The Sound and the Fury*. The narrative of "seemingly detached episodes" is like the episodic narrative of Benjy's section of the novel. According to Ferguson, the earliest version of "That Evening Sun" ("Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh") shares "striking similarities in style, dialogue, and point of view" with Benjy's section of the novel, and Blotner finds resemblances between the handwriting of "Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh" and the manuscript of *The Sound and the Fury*. Minter finds a connection in the image of twilight that appears in both of these texts and "A Justice."

Not all critics agree that the short stories came before *The Sound and the Fury*. Although Blotner places the discussion of "That Evening Sun" in the chapter entitled "June, 1927-September, 1928" in his 1974 biography of Faulkner, in the revised 1984 edition he puts the story in the "April 1930-January 1931" chapter, at which time records of the story do exist. Irving Howe believes the story is an "offshoot" of *The Sound and the Fury*, and Stephen Whicher finds that it "bears all the earmarks of an afterthought, whose conclusion the earlier novel could hardly have anticipated." Gail Morrison dates the story from the fall of 1928, after *The Sound and the Fury* was completed, and Max Putzel places it in 1930. John Matthews writes of Quentin's older voice in "That Evening Sun" as the "ghostly Quentin who survives through several textual avatars into *Absalom, Absalom!,"* a statement that presumes Faulkner's intentional use of an already

dead Quentin after *The Sound and the Fury*. The arguments on both sides are interesting for what they suggest about the writer's craft during a seminal period. However, Blotner's point in 1974 remains true: there simply is "no sending schedule, agent's record, or conclusive manuscript evidence which would permit accurate dating of the inception and writing of this story."

Noel Polk describes the textual history of "That Evening Sun" as the "most complicated of any in *These 13*." Nevertheless, critics have been able to make more verifiable observations about the development of the text than about the date of composition. "That Evening Sun" exists in several versions, both prepublication and published. The earliest known, undated, holograph manuscript is entitled "Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh." Another version, a twenty-six-page, complete ribbon typescript gives the title "That Evening Sun Go Down," but the carbon of that typescript shows the revision in Faulkner's hand to "That Evening Sun."

When H. L. Mencken accepted the story for the *American Mercury*, he described it as "capital," but he balked at naming Nancy's husband "Jesus" and at referring to her pregnancy so explicitly. Mencken seemed unconcerned that the name change would affect both dialogue and imagery. He wrote, "I see no reason why he should be called Jesus—it is, in fact, a very rare name among Negroes, and I fear using it would make most readers believe we were trying to be naughty in a somewhat strained manner." Jesus's name became *Jubah* to eliminate Mencken's concern. (In a note to Mencken about the requested changes, Faulkner refers to the character as *Judah* although the magazine version uses Jubah.) Faulkner returned to the name *Jesus* in These 13. Norman Holmes Pearson correctly observes that the return to "Jesus" restores the "paradoxical tension which was otherwise lost."

Faulkner did not incorporate all of Mencken's requests for revision. Mencken wrote, "It seems to me that the dialogue about Nancy's pregnancy, on pages four and five, is somewhat loud for a general magazine? [sic] I believe it could be modified without doing the slightest damage to the story." Faulkner wrote back that some reference to Nancy's pregnancy needed to be retained in order to maintain her husband "as a potential factor of the tragedy." He did concede to a more subdued reference to Nancy's pregnancy and submitted a revised version of those two pages. The *American Mercury* text explains Nancy's swelling apron as follows:

"He [Jubah] said it was a watermelon that Nancy had under her dress. And it was Winter, too. 'Where did you get a watermelon in the Winter?' Caddy said. 'I didn't,' Jubah said. 'It wasn't me that give it to her. But I can cut it down, same as if it was.'"

These 13 reinstates the original imagery:

"He [Jesus] said it was a watermelon that Nancy had under her dress. 'It never come off of your vine, though,' Nancy, said. 'Off of what vine?' Caddy said. 'I can cut down the vine it did come off of,' Jesus said."

Faulkner remarked of his anesthetized revision of Nancy's pregnancy: "I did remove the 'vine' business. I reckon that's what would outrage Boston."

Mencken defended his suggestions to Faulkner as "his best editorial judgment." He made additional changes once Faulkner had returned the revised typescript. The revised typescript page shows the following description of Nancy's belly when she was found hanging struck through: ". . . her belly swelling a little, paling a little as it swelled, like a colored balloon pales with distension." The magazine version reads: ". . . found Nancy hanging from the window, stark naked" and *Collected Stories* text reads: ". . . found Nancy hanging from the window, stark naked, her belly already swelling out a little, like a little balloon." Additional revisions are evident on the ribbon typescript used as setting copy. Some are in Mencken's hand and some are the work of another proofreader. They concern such matters as additional paragraph breaks and section divisions.

When he revised the story for collection, Faulkner restored many of the deletions, but he retained paragraph and section divisions inserted by Mencken, even embellishing the division of the last section by further dividing it into two sections. Leo Manglaviti believes that Faulkner worked on his revisions for *These 13* from the manuscript titled "Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh" and the *American Mercury* text. A line present in the typescript describes one of the actions Nancy threatened if Jesus were to take another wife. Among her threats the typescript adds, "Ara hand that touched her, I'd cut it off." This line does not appear in "Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh," the magazine version, or the collected version. It was not unusual for Faulkner to agree to revisions to facilitate publication; James Carothers notes that stories such as "Spotted Horses," "Snow," "Knight's Gambit," and "Shall Not Perish" were altered for publication

Although the preceding discussion focuses on the alterations that the story underwent specifically in relation to magazine publication, the extant manuscripts and published versions allow for ample study of the development of the text from the early holograph version to the version in These 13. The changes are significant. Pearson's early comparative study of the story at three stages—"Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh," the *American Mercury* version, and the These 13 version—identified the major areas of change. Pearson regards as particularly significant the substitution of the word *cabin* for *house* when the Compsons describe Nancy's dwelling because it contrasts the Compsons' perspective with that of Nancy and Jesus, who both refer to the dwelling as the "house," and represents Nancy and Jesus's "sense of the personal dignity of what had been invaded." Faulkner's deletion of material from the *Mercury* version to the *These 13* text demonstrates his awareness that direct presentation of action eliminated the need for explanation. Quentin's analysis of the Compsons' leaving Nancy's cabin is omitted; only the dramatic presentation of their exit remains. The primary alteration from the first manuscript version to the final text is the change in the "angle of reference." The point of view shifts from being "essentially Nancy's" to becoming Quentin's; as narrator, he shows the personal growth he experiences.

The Compson family presence increases throughout: the story begins and ends with them. (Pearson justifies Benjy's absence pointing out that Benjy's indifference to time makes him an inappropriate character in this particular story.) Quentin's reaction is crucial and is measured by the other children's lack of understanding: they cannot differentiate between Hallowe'en fright and Nancy's terror. The story becomes Quentin's "story of himself, as he had learned from it." The attempt to forestall the setting sun and inevitable death echo in his suicide. According to Blotner, the early manuscript focuses on Nancy although it employs Quentin as an adult to narrate the story. The "clear implication" is that Nancy returns to her cabin and death. The version entitled "That Evening Sun Go Down" is increased in length with additional description, dialogue, and background information on Nancy. Subsequently, without altering the emphasis on Nancy's story, Faulkner developed the contrast of Quentin's adult perspective with that of his childhood, particularly showing his and Caddy's sensitivity. Ferguson adds that the story is improved by the revised ending, done between magazine publication and inclusion in the collections. The deletion of Quentin's closing observation—"the white people going on, dividing the impinged lives of us and Nancy"—removes a too obvious statement of what the action demonstrates; it also eliminates a breach in the voice of the child narrator found in the inflated style of the phrase "dividing the impinged lives of us and Nancy."

Skei claims that the version in *These 13*, subsequently, used again in *Collected Stories*, is the "final, authoritative one." There are a few differences between the two collected versions, but these involve alterations of spelling, capitalization, and paragraphing. In the critical response to "That Evening Sun," the choice of source text has been irregular. In 1935, Edward O'Brien offered an extended close reading of the story in the *Short Story Case Book* series that depended on the particularities of the text. He used the magazine version, "That Evening Sun Go Down," but cited *These 13* Similarly, Sterling Brown and George Snell cite the These 13 text, but their references to specifics, such as to Jubah rather than Jesus, indicate their use of the magazine version. Frederick Karl uses "That Evening Sun Go Down" as the operative title for his references to the story unless he is specifically referring to the title in collection.

The popularity of "That Evening Sun" has led to a search for analogues to the story in life and literature. The escapades of the Compson children in this story and other texts are typically linked to the activities of the Falkner boys—Billy, Johncy, and Jack—along with their cousin Sallie Murry. Jackson Benson specifically likens Quentin Compson of "That Evening Sun," and *The Sound and the Fury* to Faulkner as a boy: a "quiet, observant, serious, somewhat introverted, and thoughtful child who had no really close friends outside the family." John Faulkner's remembrances include a woman in the community who he believes served as a model for Nancy. Nancy Snowball, a woman who once cooked and washed for the Falkners, caught the children's interest with her ability to crawl through a barbed wire fence without having to touch the load of laundry balanced on her head. The threat Jesus posed to Nancy may be traced to the murder of a woman by her husband, Dave Bowdry, that took place near the Falkner home. A nearby ditch may have added to the fictional scene that is enhanced by the danger the ditch seems to convey—either by providing Jesus a place to hide or as dividing the safety of the Compson house and the danger of the cabin.

Parallels found in literature and music relate less to characters and action than to the development of dialogue and imagery in the story. "That Evening Sun" is significantly enriched by the influence of blues music on the text. The title comes from the words to "St. Louis Blues." John Hagopian believes the relationship to the song is ironic, citing as an example the song's line "I'll love my baby till the day I die." Ken Bennett traces the story's rich associations with both blues music and black religious music; his work shows that the story's indebtedness goes much deeper than the mere borrowing of its title from Handy's "St. Louis Blues." The image of the evening sun appears in black religious music, sometimes to represent coming death and judgment. In the blues tradition, the setting sun is linked to despair and also to the "time when the black male proved his masculinity" and the prostitute's time to "shine." The character Jesus is much like the rambler character in the blues tradition who may be a criminal, a misfit, or a promiscuous lover. The language of the story is reminiscent of the double entendre prevalent in blues language, such as the reference to the vine and fruit to mean sexual promiscuity. Also, in blues language sexual acts and organs are referred to through common metaphors. Kitchen images are especially prevalent; frequently the kitchen represents the woman's body. Jesus's complaint ("I can't hang around white man's kitchen") becomes richer in that context. Voodoo also appears in blues lyrics, just as it does in the story. Nancy's discovery of the hog bone, a curse and also a phallic symbol, terrifies her. It implies "that Nancy's 'curse' is her promiscuity."

Comparisons with Hemingway, especially his short story "The Killers," have predominated in the list of important literary antecedents. O'Brien sees resemblances to Ernest Hemingway's style in the "laconic reporting" in the story of Nancy's confinement and attempted suicide in jail and patterns of dialogue in the story. Ray West compares the use of initiation in Hemingway's "The Killers" to Quentin's awakening adult sensibilities in "The Evening Sun"; he also finds similarities between Caddy's and Nick Adams's interest in the nature of evil. Leonard Frey judges Faulkner's story to be "superior" to Hemingway's "The Killers" in that Nancy, the victim of the inevitable violence, remains the dominant character whereas in "The Killers" Nick Adams is the central figure rather than Ole Andreson. Austin Wright makes the point that in both stories a "conflict with a range of possible outcomes" is initiated, but in each, the narrative ends without reaching any of the possible outcomes. The reader then must revise his or her sense of what constitutes the focus of the story. In both these cases, the "issue is precisely the failure of resolution."

A number of other studies have made brief observations of literary links between "The Evening Sun," and a wide variety of texts. Collectively, the list demonstrates more the rich texture of the story than a single dominating influence on the story. O'Brien suggests that a comparison could be made of Balzac's and Faulkner's use of chiaroscuro in the development of atmosphere. Frey likens the irony in the story to ironic presentation in ballads such as "The Twa Corbies" and "The Wife of Usher's Well": in all these, although an objective presentation of the material is offered, the reader understands more than the narrator does. Frey regards the counterpoint in the mingled conversations of Caddy and Jason with Mr. Compson and Nancy as similar to the remarks of Edgar, Lear, and the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* because in both texts the impact of their comments stems from their "varying degrees of awareness of

their positions." Richard Adams finds the phrase "a long diminishing noise of rubber and asphalt like tearing silk" to be "possibly derived from Flaubert." The image appears not only in "That Evening Sun," but also in such works as *Mosquitoes, The Wild Palms*, and *Intruder in the Dust*. Edward Richardson compares Nancy's terror with the "driving intensity" of scenes in *The White Rose of Memphis* by William Clark Faulkner, William's great-grandfather. Mark Coburn considers Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a literary analogue to the suffering Nancy.

John Rosenman traces the archetypal pattern of heaven and hell in Faulkner's story and in Ray Bradbury's much later *Dandelion Wine* (1957). Rosenman finds the resemblances striking but does not establish a direct line of influence from Faulkner to Bradbury. Rosenman credits the work of Maud Bodkin in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, Psychological Studies of Imagination* as his source for archetypal study.

As other scholars have, Robert Hamb links the title to "St. Louis Blues," but he suggests another possible parallel in William Blake's "Nurse's Song" from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. In the poem, the setting sun is used as an emblem marking the inevitable passage out of childhood. He does not claim with certainty that Faulkner knew this poem, but he confirms the similar use of the image, just as both "recognized the archetypal initiation pattern in the exposure of children to the realities of time and experience." According to John Gerlach, the story bears an inverted relationship to Ephesians. The biblical letter establishes social codes of behavior including the admonition not to let the sun set on one's anger. In "That Evening Sun" the children manipulate parents, wives are prostitutes, and the character Jesus remains angry. The story's world is akin to that portrayed in Amos.

Source: Diane Brown Jones, "'That Evening Sun,'" in *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of William Faulkner*, G. K. Hall & Co., 1994, pp. 267-74.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Perrine examines unanswered questions in "That Evening Sun," and whether Faulkner implies answers or renders them unknowable.

Critical Essay #5

Is Nancy alive or dead in the morning? This is the "overwhelming question" raised by Faulkner's "That Evening Sun." Readers have sought an answer both outside the story and in. Malcolm Cowley thought he had found proof of Nancy's murder in a passage from *The Sound and the Fury* (published 1929, two years before the story) in Caddy's reference to some bones left from the time "when Nancy fell in the ditch and Roskus shot her and the buzzards came and undressed her," but Stephen Whicher shattered that claim by demonstrating convincingly that these bones belonged to a horse or pony, not a human being. Other readers have claimed proof for Nancy's survival by pointing to *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), Faulkner's novel written twenty years after "That Evening Sun" as a sequel to *Sanctuary* (1931), in which Nancy is alive and well in the employment of Gowen and Temple Drake Stevens at a date subsequent to her employment by the Compsons in "That Evening Sun." But if Faulkner is capable of resurrecting a three-years-dead Quentin Compson from *The Sound and the Fury* to serve as narrator in "That Evening Sun," he is equally capable of resurrecting a several-years-dead Nancy from "That Evening Sun" to serve as a central character in *Requiem for a Nun*. In any case, the story must be read and interpreted on its own terms. It is unreasonable to think that Faulkner intended readers of the short story in 1931 to interpret it on the basis of evidence which he would not provide them until twenty years later.

Though probably none would deny that the ending of the story is technically indeterminate, many commentators believe that an answer is implied. Critics who believe Nancy slain have expressed themselves with enormous conviction. John V. Hagopian, explicitly inquiring whether Nancy's awareness of Jesus waiting in the ditch may not be an hallucination, rejects the possibility. "It would be foolish to wonder if Nancy will actually be killed; of course she will—all the lines of force in the story move powerfully in that direction." Edward J. O'Brien declares that, though "the climax is implicit, . . . we can have no doubt what is going to happen." Wilbur L. Schramm echoes him, saying that at the end we walk out of Nancy's life, "perfectly sure of what is going to happen." Those who take this side seem to do so mostly because of the force and intensity of Nancy's own conviction—a conviction so compelling that they call it "knowledge." Norman Holmes Pearson writes that Nancy "hates to see the coming of the dark, not because her sweet man left the town, but because he has returned to it to take a revenge which Nancy knows she cannot escape, nor the Compsons prevent." The use of the verb "knows" rather than "thinks" is frequently how these critics express their assurance. Commentators on the survival side view Nancy's mental state quite differently. Robert Heilman refers to it as one of "terrified hallucination." Jim Lee calls it "insanity caused by . . . guilt." If my informal tally is reliable, critics who believe that Nancy will be murdered outnumber their opponents by almost three to one.

In this paper I propose to show that the question of Nancy's survival is only the climactic example of a long series of questions which the story raises and leaves unanswered, that ambiguities about fact and motivation are central to its technique, and that the case for Nancy's death is much, much weaker than its proponents realize. I shall argue that

Faulkner *meant* the story to end with a question mark to which no train of inferences would supply a truly reliable answer.

Critical Essay #6

Just as Caddy throughout the story keeps asking questions which are seldom answered by the adults, so the story itself keeps raising questions for which no sure answers are provided by its author. We may always, of course, conjecture, and sometimes infer, but rarely can we rest in certainty, though we sniff like bloodhounds back and forth through the story searching for clues.

That many of these questions are deliberately raised and left unanswered can be demonstrated. Faulkner's resurrection of dead Quentin to narrate the story, rather than using an omniscient narrator, is part of his method. It is not that Quentin is an unreliable narrator. Indeed he has remarkably precise recall of what he has seen or heard or smelled. Uncertainties arise not because of defects in his memory but because of gaps in his knowledge. He can report accurately what was reported to him, he can repeat precisely what people have said, but these abilities do not guarantee the truth of their saying. In addition there is much that Quentin has not heard and does not know. And some matters, like motivation, may be unknowable except to an omniscient narrator.

Here is a partial list of questions raised by the story which cannot be certainly answered: (1) Why is Nancy so often late for cooking breakfast? (2) Why is she arrested? (3) Why does she attempt suicide? (4) Has Nancy slept with more than one white man? (5) Who fathered Nancy's unborn child? (6) Does she know? (7) Does Jesus know? (8) Why does Mr. Compson tell Jesus to stay off their place? (9) Why does Jesus leave Nancy? (10) Where does he go? (11) How long does he stay? (12) Does he come back? (13) What causes Nancy's disturbance in the kitchen? (14) Is Aunt Rachel Jesus' mother? (15) Why might Jesus be "mad" at Nancy? (16) Why does Nancy think he is angry with her? (17) For what does Nancy feel guilty? (18) Why did Mrs. Lovelady commit suicide? (19) What happened to her child? (20) What happened to Nancy's pregnancy? (21) Is Nancy alive next morning?—I shall address some, but not all of these questions. Three questions of minor importance should convince us that Faulkner's creation of uncertainties is deliberate:

Why did Mrs. Lovelady commit suicide? What happened to her child? Nancy tells Mr. Compson, "Anyway, I got my coffin money saved up with Mr. Lovelady." Quentin explains:

Mr. Lovelady was a short, dirty man who collected the Negro insurance, coming around to the cabins or the kitchens every Saturday morning to collect fifteen cents. He and his wife lived at the hotel. One morning his wife committed suicide. They had a child, a little girl. He and the child went away. After a week or two he came back alone. We would see him going along the lanes and back streets on Saturday mornings.

Quentin's remarks about Mrs. Lovelady and the child are a complete digression from the plot of the story. No reader would have missed anything had Quentin stopped at the end of his first explanatory sentence, or even short of it. But Faulkner has him go on to add two mysteries, neither of which is resolved. We must suppose, however, that Faulkner

included this material for a reason. Mr. Lovelady makes his living from the economic exploitation of blacks. His wife's suicide *may* spring from a con- flict with her husband over his profession. The husband is described as "a short, dirty man." Nancy's husband is "a short black man" with a "dirty"-looking razor scar on his face, and Nancy too attempts suicide. If a parallel is intended, its significance is that the white attitude toward blacks causes conflict not only *between* but *within* the races. In each of the story's three married couples— Jesus and Nancy, Mr. and Mrs. Compson, Mr. and Mrs. Lovelady— conflict is generated or exacerbated by the relationship of one of the pair with a person or persons of the opposite color.

Is Aunt Rachel Jesus' mother? Again Faulkner deliberately introduces uncertainty. When Mr. Compson asks Nancy, "Cant Aunt Rachel do anything with [Jesus]?" most readers would have been quite satisfied with the simple explanation "Aunt Rachel was Jesus' mother." Instead, Quentin goes on to describe Aunt Rachel, and ends with "They said she was Jesus' mother. Sometimes she said she was and sometimes she said she wasn't any kin to Jesus." A reasonable inference is that she is his mother, or she wouldn't say so, but that, when he does something outrageous, she prefers to deny kinship. Still, Jesus never speaks of her; Nancy expects no help from her; no scene in the story shows Jesus at her house. We are left with a possibility, not a certainty.

The creation of uncertainty is patently part of Faulkner's strategy in writing this story. Let us now turn to more crucial questions.

Why is Nancy so often late for cooking breakfast? "About half the time," Quentin tells us, the children had to summon her by throwing stones at her house until she appeared, leaning her head around the door with no clothes on, to say, "I ain't studying no breakfast." Jason shouts, "Father says you're drunk. Are you drunk, Nancy?" Quentin continues: "So we thought it was whisky until that day they arrested her again. . . ." Here Quentin's narration swings in a wide arc through a revelation of Nancy's prostitution to an account of her suicide attempt and ends with the jailer's asserting that "it was cocaine and not whisky, because a nigger full of cocaine wasn't a nigger any longer." Four reasons are therefore suggested for Nancy's behavior: that she's drunk; that she's been engaging in prostitution; that she's high on cocaine; plus Nancy's own explanation, "I got to get my sleep out." An astonishing number of critics accept the explanation that Nancy is a dope-addict, though the jailer is a brutal bigot whose reasoning, cast in syllogistic form, is (a) No Negro has sufficient courage to attempt suicide unless he's high on cocaine; (b) Nancy is a Negro and has attempted suicide; (c) therefore Nancy is high on cocaine. Others, perhaps reasoning that Nancy would not have the courage to challenge Mr. Stovall in public unless she were drunk, accept Mr. Compson's explanation to his children about her behavior, disregarding the probability that Mr. Compson would prefer to give them such an account than expose them at their age to the harsh facts of prostitution (the one thing we know Nancy to be guilty of) and disregarding also the implications of Quentin's statement, "So we thought it was whisky *until*. . . ." But the facts are that nowhere in the story is Nancy shown taking cocaine or drinking anything stronger than coffee, and that, despite her overwhelming terror later in the story, she is not naturally a timid woman, as shown by her taunting her violent husband with the assertion that the child she is carrying is not off his "vine" as well as by

her challenging Mr. Stovall. Nancy's explanation, together with her unclad appearance, supports the prostitution theory. But Nancy's nakedness and her need of sleep can be equally well explained by supposing that she stayed awake late making love with her husband. We tend to forget that Nancy's house is Jesus' house too; but the children chunk stones at it from a distance, not just out of thoughtless disrespect, but because their father told them "not to have anything to do with Jesus."

Why is Nancy arrested? Prostitution? Use of illegal drugs? Being drunk and disorderly? Disturbing the peace? All we can be sure of is our admiration for Faulkner's conjuring up a past history of arrest with a single word ("again"). We are not told how often or why.

Why does Nancy attempt suicide? The reasons are probably multiple, may be unknown to Nancy herself, and are best left to the imagination of the reader. The function of her attempt in the story is clearer. The depth of her despair here, put beside the violence of her jealous reaction to Mr. Compson's suggestion that Jesus has probably "got another wife" in St. Louis, reveals Nancy's emotional extremes and prepares for her paroxysm of fear when she hears that Jesus has returned.

Who fathered Nancy's unborn child? Several commentators confidently name Mr. Stovall as the father, since he is the only candidate named; others more cautiously attribute paternity only to an unknown white man, their caution validated by Mr. Compson's rebuke to Nancy, "If you'd just let white men alone." We cannot be sure, however, whether Mr. Compson speaks from certain knowledge, or whether his rebuke simply combines the universal tendency to generalize from one instance with the Southern white's tendency to give black behavior the least favorable interpretation. Moreover, Jesus' claim that he can "cut down the vine" that Nancy's "watermelon" came off of is a valid threat only if Mr. Stovall is the only white man she has slept with. How else would he know whose "vine" to cut? A third possibility, that Jesus himself is the father, is seldom considered. Yet how can Nancy know who made her pregnant if she was living with Jesus while having sexual relations with another? That Nancy and Jesus have been living together is indicated by the general acceptance of them as husband and wife, by the children's approaching no nearer than the ditch to Nancy's house, by Jesus' taking breakfast in the Compson kitchen when Nancy begins cooking there, by Jesus' eloquent statement that "when white men want to come in my house, I ain't got no house," and by Nancy's announcement of Jesus' departure: "one morning she woke up and Jesus was gone." On the basis of the published story alone, we must acknowledge a possibility that Nancy, in declaring that her "watermelon" didn't come off Jesus' "vine," is baiting Jesus with a possibility, not a certainty.

Evidence from outside the story, however, does certify Faulkner's intention as being that Jesus should *know* the child not to be his. In submitting the story for publication in the *American Mercury*, Faulkner modified the passage about Nancy's pregnancy (in response to its editor H. L. Mencken's protest that it was "somewhat loud for a general magazine") as follows:

When Dilsey was sick in her cabin and Nancy was cooking for us, we could see her apron swelling out; . . .[Jesus] said it was a watermelon that Nancy had under her dress.

And it was Winter, too. "Where did you get a watermelon in the Winter?" Caddy said. "I didn't," [Jesus] said. "It wasn't me that give it to her. But I can cut it down, same as if it was."

Faulkner restored the original wording—both more effective and more ambiguous—for the story's first book publication in *These Thirteen* later that year.

Why does Jesus leave Nancy? Nancy wakes up one morning "and Jesus was gone." The almost casual way she tells it does not suggest that they had quarreled. Nancy says, "He quit me. Done gone to Memphis, I reckon. Dodging them city *po*-lice for a while." Had Jesus simply tired of dodging the Jefferson "*po*-lice" and sought temporary respite in the larger city? Later, Nancy says, "He said I done woke up the devil in him and ain't but one thing going to lay it down again." But Nancy makes this remark after the presumed return of Jesus; if he said it to her, he must have said it sometime before he left, for there has been no communication between them since. The threat (presuming Jesus actually made it and Nancy has correctly interpreted it) would explain Nancy's outbreak of fear on hearing of his return. But if Jesus intends to murder her, why must he go away first and then come back to do it? And why does Nancy's fear not date from his making the threat? Might she not have "invented" the remark to rationalize the fear that has arisen in her *after* his departure?

Where does Jesus go? Nancy says, "Done gone to Memphis, I reckon." Father says, "He's probably in St. Louis now."

Why might Jesus be "mad" at Nancy? Why does she think he is? When Mr. Compson suggests to Nancy that Jesus has "probably got another wife by now," Nancy's reaction is immediate: "If he has, I better not find out about it. I'd stand right there over them, and every time he wropped her, I'd cut that arm off. I'd cut his head off and I'd slit her bell and I'd shove—." Reacting this way, Nancy might very well think that Jesus would react the same way when the cases are reversed and she sleeps with another man. But, as critics have pointed out, when Jesus is told that the watermelon is not off his vine, he threatens the father, not Nancy. Moreover, he must have known about her prostitution earlier, for his speech about "When white man want to come in my house, I ain't got no house" voices a sense of injustice that must have been smouldering for a long time. Not until the moment when he tells Nancy, if he does, that she "done woke up the devil in him" does Jesus manifest any anger toward Nancy. The problem is to explain the delay. But the parallel between Jesus' sleeping with a hypothetical "St. Louis woman" and Nancy's sleeping with Mr. Stovall is inexact. In the one case Jesus is loving a new woman and has forgotten Nancy. In the other, Nancy is sleeping with Mr. Stovall for money and has not at all forgotten Jesus. Still, Jesus feels the indignity keenly and makes a violent threat, just as Nancy does, though against the father, not against Nancy. We hear nothing of his attempting to carry out that threat, however. The only violence in the story is committed by whites against blacks. And even supposing that Jesus knows who the father is, there is little possibility of his being able to carry out the threat, so supreme is white power in Jefferson. Though Mr. Stovall has slept with Nancy several times, has refused to pay her, has knocked her down and kicked her teeth out, and possibly fathered her child, Jesus has pretty clearly never attacked Mr. Stovall.

Nancy continually protects herself against Jesus by sleeping in the Compsons' house or surrounding herself with Compson children, knowing that Jesus is unlikely to attack her in their presence. Meanwhile, we may conjecture, Jesus' anger and frustration seethe inside him, and his indignity is daily pressed upon him as Nancy's belly swells. Such being the case, is it illogical to believe that the anger originally directed toward the unknown father might be redirected toward Nancy? Nancy herself undergoes an emotional transition, from blaming others to blaming, at least partially, herself. At the beginning of her terror, she says, I ain't nothing but a nigger. "It ain't none of my fault." But near the end she says, "I reckon it belong to me, I reckon what I going to get ain't no more than mine." Nancy is capable of changing from an initial defiant taunting of Jesus ("It ain't off your vine") to a feeling of guilt over her physical infidelity to the man who "always been good" to her. Whether we accept a change in Jesus' feelings or not will depend on how much credence we give to Nancy's report that he said she "done woke up the devil in him and ain't but one thing going to lay it down again." Nancy's feelings change; there are good reasons why Jesus' feelings *might* change; and there are reasons why Nancy should believe they have changed, whether they have or not. The mere act of his leaving her would explain *that*.

What happens to Nancy's pregnancy? It is puzzling that Nancy's pregnancy, forced so vividly on our attention early in the story, should never be mentioned again. There are three possibilities: Nancy has had an abortion; she has had a miscarriage or stillbirth; she is still pregnant at the end of the story. A recent critic contends that "the following enigmatic paragraph can hardly be read in any other way than as a symbolic confirmation of an abortion":

"Father said for you to go home and lock the door, and you'll be all right," Caddy said. "All right from what, Nancy? Is Jesus mad at you?" Nancy was holding the coffee cup in her hands again, her elbows on her knees and her hands holding the cup between her knees. She was looking into the cup. "What have you done that made Jesus mad?" Caddy said. Nancy let the cup go. It didn't break on the floor, but the coffee spilled out, and Nancy sat there with her hands still making the shape of the cup.

There is nothing enigmatic about this paragraph. It is simply a graphic description of Nancy's terror. Nancy's sitting with her hands still making the shape of the cup she has dropped, like other symptoms of her terror, exhibits a violent disjunction between the signals received and sent out by her brain. In her suicide attempt, after putting the noose around her neck, she can't make her hands let go of the window ledge. In her cabin she keeps her hand on the hot lamp without realizing that the hand is burning. But if one insists on reading the paragraph symbolically, it is a much apter symbol for miscarriage than for abortion, for Nancy's dropping the cup and spilling its contents is involuntary. But, indeed, the abortion-theory must be dismissed. In Mississippi, before the turn of the century, a black woman of Nancy's class and education would not have had access to abortion at her stage of pregnancy. Still, if Nancy has had either abortion or miscarriage, it is strange that Quentin, keenly observant of physical detail, should not mention that Nancy's belly was "flat" again. A colleague of mine suggests that the sentence "Jason's legs stuck straight out of his pants where he sat on Nancy's lap" may be intended to convey this information. Possibly so. We can not be certain.

Does Jesus come back? So strong is Nancy's conviction of Jesus' return that few commentators question it, yet all the reasons supporting it are undermined by uncertainty.

Our first news of Jesus' return is received on the night that Nancy sits by the cold stove in the Compsons' kitchen, scared to go home:

"I am going to walk down the lane with Nancy," [father] said. "She says that Jesus is back." "Has she seen him?" mother said. "No. Some Negro sent her word that he was back in town.". . .

What we are given here is *at the very least* a fourth-hand report. Quentin tells us that father said that Nancy said that "some Negro" said. Though there is not need to question the reliability of Quentin or of father, the last two members in the series are increasingly unreliable. The phrase "sent her word" (rather than "told her") suggests moreover the probability of one or more additional intermediaries. What evidence the first Negro had, how the word was sent, what the word was, whether it was transmitted accurately, and whether Nancy interpreted it correctly—all these factors are left undetermined.

The next suggestion of Jesus' return is the disturbance in the kitchen when the Compson household is awakened by Nancy's terrified ululation. When Caddy asks, "Was it Jesus? Did he try to come into the kitchen?" Nancy can only answer, "I ain't nothing but a nigger. God knows." Whether Nancy was frightened by an intruder, whether that intruder was Jesus, or whether the whole affair was a bad dream—these matters are left unresolved. Nancy herself seems not to know the answers.

The chief support for Jesus' return seems simply the intensity of Nancy's own subjective conviction. Dilsey asks, "How do you know he's back? You ain't seen him." "I can feel him," Nancy says. "I can feel him laying yonder in the ditch." "Tonight?" Dilsey asks. "How come you know it's tonight?" "I know," Nancy replies. "He's there waiting. I know. I done lived with him too long. I know what he is fixing to do fore he know it himself." Nancy may well have lived with Jesus long enough to have a feeling for how his mind works; but this hardly gives her absolute power to predict his actions, let alone the precise *time* of his actions. There is no evidence that she had foreseen Jesus' leaving her, and there is some suggestion that she was surprised when it happened. She woke up one morning "and Jesus was gone." If she failed to predict this event when she went to bed with him the previous evening, why should one think she could predict the date on which Jesus would attempt to kill her when she has been out of communication with him for weeks? Dilsey's question is crucial: "How come you know it's tonight?" There is no rational answer to Dilsey's question. There is, however, a strong psychological reason why Nancy's terror should peak this night. Dilsey's return to work has deprived Nancy of the security offered by the Compson house. For the first time in weeks she is faced with the prospect of spending the night alone in her cabin.

Nancy's intuitions are, for her, convictions; and she expresses them with such force that many readers accept them as truth. Yet it is difficult to believe that, in the lapse of time

between the first report of Jesus' return and Nancy's night of terror, there would be no confirmation of his return. If Jesus is back, why has nobody seen him? It is also hard to imagine why Jesus would lie for hours in an uncomfortable ditch in order to take his revenge. There are easier ways. And Nancy's words strain credulity when she tells Mr. Compson, "He looking through that window this minute, waiting for yawl to go," just as they strain it when Mr. Compson escorts her home on the first night after she has heard of Jesus' return: "I can feel him now, in this lane. He hearing us talk, every word, hid somewhere, waiting." In Nancy's mind, after his "return," Jesus is omnipresent.

A final piece of evidence for Jesus' return would seem, at first sight, objective enough. "I got the sign," Nancy says. "It was on the table when I come in. It was a hogbone, with blood meat still on it, laying by the lamp." But *when* did she get the sign? If she means when she returned to the cabin with the children, the children would have seen it too, as would Mr. Compson when he arrived. (If she had removed it, the children would have seen her remove it, and she could not have removed it so far that she could not have *showed* it to Mr. Compson). If she refers to sometime earlier in the day, why had she not mentioned it to Dilsey when Dilsey asked, "How do you know he's back? You ain't seen him?" We are left with strong reasons to believe that the "sign" is a desperate last-ditch invention of Nancy's feverish mind designed to keep Mr. Compson in the cabin. (It should be pointed out that Mr. Compson's "He's not here. I would have seen him" is equally an invention—a display of false confidence designed to calm Nancy down. When Nancy replies, "He waiting in the ditch yonder," Mr. Compson first says, "Nonsense," but then, "Do you know he's there?" Even *he* is impressed by the force of Nancy's conviction.)

Is Nancy alive next morning? It is now time to construct the most plausible account of the story we can imagine for each of the two suppositions about its ending:

(A) Nancy, washerwoman, cook, and prostitute, is made pregnant by a white man. Her violent husband, Jesus, angered by the pregnancy, makes what is either a castration or a murder threat against the father, and voices his indignation in a fine speech about "I cant hang around white man's kitchen. But white man can hang around mine. . . ." Frustrated, however, by his powerlessness to carry out his threat, he gradually turns his anger against Nancy and tells her she "done woke up the devil" in him and only her death will "lay it down again." Perhaps to prevent himself from carrying out this threat, he leaves town. His anger, still frustrated, drives him back. Nancy, hearing of his return, knowing his violent nature, and aware of his threat, knows he has come back to kill her, and is so overcome by fear that Mr. Compson feels obliged to escort her home at night. When Mrs. Compson objects to being left alone, a pallet is fixed for Nancy in the kitchen. After Jesus makes an unsuccessful attempt one night to break into the house, Nancy's fear turns to terror. Denied the protection of the Compson house after Dilsey's return, she entices the children to come home with her and pretends that their father is with them. She knows Jesus will strike this night because she is unprotected and because he has left a "sign," which, in her disturbed state, she had not mentioned to Dilsey. When Mr. Compson, who has come after the children, refuses to stay with her, her will breaks, and she resigns herself to the death that surely awaits her.

(B) Nancy's suicide attempt, to which her pregnancy is a contributing cause, displays the conflicting impulses and emotional extremes to which she is subject. In the kitchen sometime later, she taunts Jesus with the assertion that the "watermelon" under her skirt "never came off[his] vine." Jesus' anger is directed, not against her, however, but against the unknown father and against white men in general. When Jesus leaves her, her response is at first casual, but during his absence she questions the reasons for his departure and her own role in it. She is torn between the desire to relieve herself of responsibility ("I ain't nothing but a nigger. It ain't none of my fault") and a need to acknowledge her guilt ("Jesus always been good to me. Whenever he had two dollars, one of them was mine"). She shows that her feelings toward Jesus run deep when she tells Mr. Compson what she'd do if she caught Jesus with another wife. The false rumor that Jesus has returned intensifies her inner conflicts and feelings of guilt, and she convinces herself that Jesus has come back to kill her ("I ain't going to see him but once more, with that razor in his mouth"). She imagines that Jesus had threatened her life before he left ("He done say I woke up the devil in him"), and she irrationally feels him lurking everywhere, waiting, hearing all she says. She so vividly hallucinates an attempted attack by Jesus in the Compsons' kitchen one night that afterwards she is unsure what actually happened. Her terror psychologically peaks on the day when Dilsey returns to the kitchen, depriving her of her sanctuary. Her guilt and her fear mount together ("I hellborn," she tells Jason. "I going back where I come from soon"), and she turns to the desperate expedient of enticing the Compson children to her cabin. When Mr. Compson dismisses her fears as "Nonsense," her imagination creates the "proof" of the hog-bone with blood meat still on it. When this too fails, her will breaks, and she resigns herself to what she falsely believes her fate, now fully accepting her guilt ("I reckon it belong to me. I reckon what I going to get ain't no more than mine").

The first account is the more emotionally compelling, as demonstrated by the reactions of commentators. The second bears up better, I think, under rational scrutiny of the facts. But neither account can be proved. Each rests on undemonstrable assumptions, each embraces long sequences of conjecture (the first, especially, about the progress of Jesus' feelings; the second about Nancy's).

If we ask ourselves Faulkner's *intention* in the story, we must conclude that Faulkner wished to end it with an unresolvable question mark. First, Faulkner takes great pains to emphasize that question mark. On the final three pages of the story, the question is put before the reader six separate times. Nancy four times asserts that Jesus is waiting in the ditch, and Mr. Compson four times dismisses the assertion as "Nonsense." After that, Mr. Compson twice answers Caddy's questions with assurances that nothing is going to happen and that Jesus has gone away. Even so, Quentin is unpersuaded. "Who will do our washing now, Father?" he asks. The Compson family are divided on the answer. Second, the uncertainty about the ending is *not* caused by any gap in Quentin's knowledge. Quentin certainly knows whether Nancy was alive or not the next morning. This uncertainty exists because Faulkner deliberately stops the story before Quentin reaches the next morning. Finally, the question of Nancy's survival is the crowning uncertainty in a story whose consistent method is uncertainty. The other uncertainties lead up to and feed into the final uncertainty.

Critical Essay #7

"That Evening Sun" is about fear and the gulf separating the white and black communities which is both cause and result of that fear. The uncertainT ties of the story serve both subjects. Many of the gaps in Quentin's knowledge arise from the separation of the two communities; most of the uncertainties feed into our final uncertainty about the outcome of the conflict between Nancy and Jesus. This unresolved personal conflict reflects the larger unresolved social conflict of which it is a symptom. Fifty years after the Emancipation there has been no improvement in white-black relationships. Finally, the uncertainties of the story, especially the final uncertainty, intensify the fear and horror felt by the reader: Nancy's fear is multiplied as if by many mirrors. If Mr. Compson had seen clearly where Jesus was hiding in the ditch, or if Nancy had seen clearly that Jesus was not there, the force of Faulkner's masterpiece would be sadly diminished. Unresolved, the story haunts the consciousness and conscience of the reader far beyond its formal limits.,/p>

Source: Laurence Perrine, "'That Evening Sun': A Skein of Uncertainties," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1985, pp. 295-307.

Topics for Further Study

Do research about daily life in the South at the turn of the century. The story talks about people having telephones in their houses—when did telephones come into common household use? What appliances and tools do we have now that people did not have then? How do you think this made their lives different?

Investigate race relations in the South from the end of the Civil War to the start of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. What was "Jim Crow"? What kinds of work did African Americans do? What possibilities did they have for advancement in society?

Read more work by William Faulkner about his imaginary county in Mississippi. Focus especially on work that involves characters who appear in "That Evening Sun": Quentin, Caddy, and Jason Compson, and Dilsey. Some good sources are the novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Does reading these works complement or change your understanding of the characters and action of "That Evening Sun"?

Faulkner uses a line from a famous song, W. C. Handy's "Saint Louis Blues," as the title for his short story. Handy is one of America's most influential musicians. Research the career of W. C. Handy. What musical forms did he pioneer? What musicians were influenced by him?

Compare and Contrast

1898: In the South, black people are prevented from voting, and white people can physically attack black people with little fear of punishment.

1990s: Although some racism persists, the South offers more equal opportunities to African-American citizens than in the past. Southern cities such as Memphis, Atlanta, and Dallas have black mayors, and African Americans represent many Southern districts in Congress.

1896: In Plessy v. Ferguson, the United States Supreme Court gives official sanction to racial segregation, ruling that "separate but equal" public facilities are Constitutional.

1990s: President Clinton tells America that racial harmony and understanding should be the nation's greatest priority, and appoints a commission to study ways that the government can promote a more diverse society.

1898: The United States, still recovering from its civil war, is about to enter upon the world stage as an imperialist power by declaring war on Spain. The Spanish-American War will give the United States its first colonies outside of the Western Hemisphere, including Guam and the Philippines.

1999: After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States is the world's most important power. In conflicts including those in Iraq, Yugoslavia, and Haiti, the United States leads the world's military forces.

1931: When Faulkner writes his story, America is reeling from the effects of the Great Depression. President Herbert Hoover is blamed for widespread poverty, unemployment, and misery.

1999: The American economy is as strong as it has ever been, having undergone the largest peacetime expansion in history.

What Do I Read Next?

"That Evening Sun" by William Faulkner is included in *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (1950), a collection of Faulkner's best and most representative stories. Although Faulkner is best known for his novels, his short stories are some of the best American stories ever written. *Collected Stories* is divided up thematically, into sections about the country, the village, the wilderness, and three sections that take place away from Yoknapatawpha.

Faulkner's most famous novel is *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Although sometimes difficult to read and experimental in its narrative techniques, the novel is extremely rewarding. In it the story of the breakup of the Compson family is told from different points of view, including Jason's and Quentin's.

There have been hundreds of books written about Faulkner's fictional county of Yoknapatawpha. The standard work is Cleanth Brooks' *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963). Brooks exhaustively catalogs every character who appears in Faulkner's world, summarizes and analyzes the novels and stories that take place there, and provides what is probably the best introduction to Faulkner's amazing accomplishment.

Faulkner's near-contemporary Flannery O'Connor also wrote about the South and often used violence and family conflicts as the backdrops for her stories. O'Connor's characters are often like Quentin Compson, torn between an old South of racial segregation and agrarian values, and a modern South that is becoming more a part of a unified America. Her stories "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961) and "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" (1953) both portray middle-aged women who are having trouble accepting the new ways.

A more modern representation of the South can be found in the writings of the contemporary author Bobbie Ann Mason. In such stories as "Shiloh" (1982), Mason examines the conflict between the old, insular South and the "New South" of office parks, subdivisions, and franchise stores. Like Faulkner before her, Mason draws a vivid portrait of a South in transition.

Leon Litwack, a historian, has researched the daily lives of black people in the South from the era of slavery to the present. His book *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (1998) collects the reactions and recollections of thousands of African Americans who lived in the South at the time that "That Evening Sun" takes place.

Further Study

Cash, W. J., and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, eds., *The Mind of the South*, Vintage Books, 1991,

This widely popular nonfiction work was first published in 1941 and has ever since been recognized as a path-breaking work. The book presents examinations of the Southern class system and its legacies of racism, religiosity, culture.

Inge, M. Thomas, ed., *Conversations with William Faulkner*, University of Mississippi Press, 1999.

This collection of interviews ranges from Faulkner's early years as a writer in 1916 to the early 1960s when he was composing his last novel. These interviews build a profile of Faulkner in his daily world and home. They also capture the many myths that were perpetuated about Faulkner and that he helped foster.

Kartiganer, Donald, and Ann J. Abadie eds., *Faulkner at 100: Retrospect and Prospect*, University of Mississippi Press, 2000.

This work is a collection of presentations by literary scholars given at the 1997 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference in Oakland, Mississippi. Though each entry is slight (covering about twenty mintues per speech), they cover a wide range of aspects within Faulkner's works.

Minter, David L., *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*, John Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Minter's book draws on published and unpublished interviews with Faulkner, his letters, and his writings to present the many fascinating angles of Faulkner's personality.

Williamson, Joel, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

Williamson's text is both a biography of William Faulkner and an examination of Faulkner's fictional worlds. The book becomes an analysis of Faulkner's history, and through presentations of him and his ancestors, it unfolds an intriguing insight into Southern culture.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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