



*Chronotopes of law  
in William Faulkner's novels,  
1930-1939<sup>1</sup>*

by Cinzia Scarpino

The recurrence of the chronotopes of law in Faulkner's work is to be read in Bakhtinian terms, as a sign of the novel capacity to represent heteroglossia of ever-changing social formations. It is important to bear in mind that (Faulkner's) novels are the product of the discursive permeability between different social languages, generated by their cultural contiguity, built out of historical contingencies (Hannon 2005: 159).

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<sup>1</sup> The following essay is an excerpt from *Anni Trenta alla sbarra: giustizia e letteratura nella Grande Depressione* (Milano, Ledizioni), a forthcoming book focused on the representation of law and justice in American literature during the Great Depression. More specifically, this essay is a preview of the last chapter of the book and analyzes the narrative function of chronotopes of law within four novels written in the 1930s by William Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939). With the exception of *Pylon* (1935), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) – that belongs to the genre of the historical novel and was therefore excluded on the basis of critical considerations that are not central to this essay –, *The Unvanquished* (1938) a short stories collection, and *the Hamlet* (1940), the analysis of which was omitted for reason of space.



In spite of an almost mythical concept of time, Faulkner's historical awareness permeates his whole work. If the cyclic returns and circular imagery typical of myth abound throughout Faulkner's novels and suggest the presentness and inescapability of the past, the historical contingencies of the 1930s constantly seep through his novelistic discourse.<sup>2</sup> To some extent, Faulkner's novels incarnate the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, with the deep South of Yoknapatawpha functioning as the geographical and historical periphery of a whole nation in crisis, a mythical county in which the echoes of coeval times are deadened by the always-returning spatio-temporal traces of the past. On the one hand, the impossibility of change, the hopeless trapping of characters in time (the epic stasis of what is non-contemporaneous) – Southern law works, at best, as the very denial of truth, and produces approximate justice –, on the other, the feeble possibility of change (the novelistic openness to what is contemporaneous), almost inevitably doomed to failure.

Operating at a level in between impossibility and possibility are catastrophic imagination and a looming sense of impending crisis and end. Ultimately, the feeling of expectation for something to happen – often a brutal act of violence – is the key to understanding the characters of *As I Lay Dying* (1985a), *Sanctuary* (1985b), *Light in August* (1985c), and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1990). By the same token, the characters' desire for redressing legal and penal disputes is not concerned with the civic instances of socially inclusive justice, and even less with a reformist/revolutionary reframing of the law: waiting for justice to be done means to waiting for anything to be done in order to keep everything in its place.

In Faulkner's Mississippi – a state whose very institutional and legal tenets rest on racial segregation and a state in which white evangelical protestant apocalyptic imagination sees the violation of that order as the primary cause of cataclysmic phenomena (Hofer 2012: 23) – the fictional recurrence of fires, hurricanes, and floods renders both the annihilation of any form of human agency and social protest and the immutability of the juridical system (41).

If social struggles are to be considered “performative, as they actively produce [...] the forms of power, law or knowledge that best suit their expectations” (de Sousa Santos 2002: 418), and if they can be given only within “the uniqueness and irreversibility” (shorthand for historicity) of what is contemporaneous, then Faulkner's structural use of catastrophic phenomena (fires and floods) as the main catalysts of a repressed social crisis evokes the all too reversible process of any performative action.

The following pages will analyze Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1985a), *Sanctuary* (1985b), *Light in August* (1985c), and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1990), in the light of the narrative and narratological interaction between the traditional chronotopes of law

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<sup>2</sup> For a study of the relevant geographical and historical frames of reference for Faulkner's novels see *William Faulkner in Context*, edited by John T. Matthews, especially the sections dedicated to “Places” and “Times”.



(the trial, the prison), the horizontal chronotopes of the barn, the 'shuttered' house and the river, and the vertical chronotopes of the fire and the flood.<sup>3</sup> The essay argues that while the catalyst function of the vertical chronotopes to trigger a potential challenge to official law is always accelerated by two main kernels/nuclei deeply embedded in Southern obsession for miscegenation (the rape and murder of a white woman and the lynching of an alleged mulatto), the potentially overthrowing action of these chronotopes does not, in the end, bring about any real change in the course of human and legal justice. With the truth literally buried by fire and water, the characters' quest is perpetually thrust back into the stasis of non-contemporaneity.

#### THE LAW OF THE BARN, THE 'SHUTTERED' HOUSE, AND THE RIVER: WAITING

...then he heard the sound of fire; the furious sound of gasoline...  
"It's his lawyer."  
"Here's the man that defended him..."  
"Put him in, too. There's enough left to burn a lawyer."  
William Faulkner, *Sanctuary*

...the convicts sat in a line ..., their shackled feet dangling above the brown motionless flood out of which the railroad embankment rose, pristine and intact, in a kind of paradoxical denial and repudiation of change and portent, not talking, just looking quietly across the track to where the other half of the amputated town seemed to float ...  
William Faulkner, *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*

In Faulkner's South – be it Yoknapatawpha or Lafayette County – race, gender and class are fixed in juridical practices quite impervious to social change. All of the seven novels published by the author in the 1930s – and particularly *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939) – evoke the prominent role of customary law in ruling class, race and gender disputes within the local communities. By anticipating, substituting, and often rejecting county and state jurisdiction, customary law operates below (or above) courtrooms and jails, through violent actions such as burnings at the stake, lynching, castrations, and rapes. With the exception of *As I Lay Dying* and, partially, *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*, in these novels the

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<sup>3</sup> In the "vertical" chronotopes of fires and floods temporality does not unfold horizontally (that is, by and large, on an historical axis unravelling according to a logic of past-present-future) but is compressed and compacted into vertical layers of ascending/discending nonlinear strata that allow for a sort of lateral and exceptional rearrangement of time.



portrayal of state or county law is often connected to savage actions triggered by the role of women within racist and patriarchal communities. Thus, Temple Drake's rape in *Sanctuary* can be read as an act of retaliation for being an impure version of the Southern Belle; while the criminal acts in *Light in August* – the murder of Joanna Burden by Joe Christmas and his lynching and castration by a fanatic white supremacist heading a local militia – are staged in the Southern racist psychodrama of miscegenation as the alleged rape of a white woman by a self-proclaimed black male.

The violent actions (murders, rapes, lynchings) also mark the kernels of the novels and are displayed within a series of horizontal chronotopes – the barn, the 'shuttered' house, the courtroom, the river. In turn, the horizontal chronotopes host a series of "catalyst" chronotopes in the form of always-returning cataclysms (floods, hurricanes, fires) deeply embedded into the histories of the states of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida.

In spite of a geographical contiguity with Walker Evans and James Agee's Alabama in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Faulkner's South differs from it because of the more persistent circularity of time. Even if they respond to the social contemporaneity of the Great Depression, these four novels mirror a non-linear historical trajectory verging on myth. If history is cyclical – and the past, that is never dead, absorbs both the present and the future –,<sup>4</sup> the representation of customary and institutional law becomes key to the reassertion of legal codes that do not appear to change, if not with geological slowness, in the face of changing institutions and evolving social formations (slavery, Jim Crow codes, property relationships). It should not therefore come as a surprise that in these four novels the catalyst chronotopes triggering or ratifying the motifs of law and justice are always related to fires, floods and hurricanes: natural events historically affected by human agency (think of the Mississippi 1927 flood) but mainly partaking of a mythical quality, metaphor of the always-returning flux of time (Saldivar and Goldberg 2015: 198). Thus the recurring actions of natural/human catastrophic phenomena are related to a set of horizontal chronotopes that pave the way for the former to "detonate".

Associated with fires/arsons are the barn – that plays a central role in *As I Lay Dying* and *Sanctuary* (but also in *The Hamlet*) – and the 'shuttered' house. In its two versions (the shut/collapsing/desolate house and the brothel), the chronotope of the shuttered house is very productive in both *Light in August* and *Sanctuary*. In the former, Joanna Burden's decaying mausoleum of virginity entraps Joe Christmas who will finally burn it down,<sup>5</sup> in the latter, Lee Goodwin's run-down bootlegging house and Miss Reba's house of prostitution are portrayed as two prison-like labyrinths that literally close over Temple, aggravate her psychological instability, and indirectly consign Goodwin to a lynching mob after an unfair trial.

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<sup>4</sup> The famous statement "The past is never dead. It's not even past" is uttered by Gavin Stevens in *Requiem for a Nun*. Faulkner 1951: 491.

<sup>5</sup> Like Sutpen's house burned down by Clytie in *Absalom, Absalom!*



Floods are conversely related to the river chronotope. By hosting exceptional natural phenomena, the river – an unpredictable open space juxtaposed to the enclosed spaces of the prison and the house – thus serves as a possible vehicle of change in the lives of the protagonists.

The potentially subversive action of fires and floods always results in a redefinition – often a re-enforcement – of the law. These detonations never bring about a re-writing of justice but a return to the *status quo ante*. Fires are generally inspired by mad rage and are ultimately aimed at crushing any possible transformation. They appear regularly within Faulkner's fiction, often under the specific category of "barn burning". Ted Atkinson has argued that the incendiary acts in early Twentieth-century South belong to unorganized forms of protest against property typical of populism (Atkinson 2006: 183) and originated in conservative political campaigns.

If, unlike floods (and hurricanes and draughts), the chronotope of barn burning is the product of human agency, it nevertheless shares with those natural cataclysmic phenomena a certain catastrophist sense of fate. Whereas in the literature and popular cultural discourses of the Great Depression, the fictional and iconographic use of natural disasters of the 1920s and 1930s (the Mississippi floods, the Dust Bowl) is turned into the compelling metaphor of a collapsing country (Denning 1997: 265), Faulkner's use of calamitous natural events does not engage in any narrative of historical conjuncture but rather suggests an almost mythical conception of history. The very mobility/nomadism of Faulkner's characters (e.g. Joe Christmas and Lena Groove in *Light in August*, the Bundren family's journey in *As I Lay Dying*) is not driven by the physical/metaphorical search of land, work, or freedom; their moving around the county/country has more to do with the perpetual roaming of the dispossessed, the uprooted, and the desperate who have little historical awareness and no political project to hold onto and struggle for.

More specifically, it is plausible to read Faulkner's cyclic conception of history also in the light of his obsession for genealogy. According to Arthur F. Kinney, Faulkner's characters are defined and dominated not so much by race, gender or class, but by family, by the generational unraveling of the stories taking place among the people Yoknapatawpha along family lines (Kinney 2007: 180).<sup>6</sup> Within such closely endogamous literary geography, nothing really changes; names are stubbornly passed down from generation to generation within circular family sagas, and novels' endings return full-circle to beginnings, with no linear progression of the plot in between.

The action of fires and floods enters this cyclical dimension: even when they refer to historically situated events, they become chronotopes of the personal and familiar *impasse* of characters trapped in epic stasis.

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<sup>6</sup> There are three generations of Snopes, six generations of Compsons and Sutpens, and seven generations of Sartoris and McCaslins (Kinney 2007: 180).



In such novelistic deployment of the category of time, chronotopes of law becomes instrumental to the representation of an otherwise static historical and juridical framework. If we consider a legal system as “a more or less sedimented terrain, a geological construct made of different laws composing different layers” (De Sousa Santos 2002: 418), then the Southern legal system may be described as impervious to juridical adjustment, that is resistant to incorporating – let alone promoting – new layer of laws.

Legal imagination and vocation are well ingrained in Faulkner’s own biography as it runs “five generations deep” (Watson 1993: 7)<sup>7</sup> – lawyers, courtrooms, and prisons literally punctuate the author’s novels (4). Still, in Faulkner’s fiction forensic figures and traditional chronotopes of law embody the very failure and shortcomings of the legal system to prevail over corruption, injustice and Snopesism. When the local jurisdiction is not thoroughly reactionary, flawed and corrupt, it is powerless and inadequate (as Horace Benbow in *Sanctuary*), and in either case it appears to be inherently compliant with Southern customs in terms of racial segregation, gender and class relations. Notwithstanding Horace Benbow’s good intentions, and, in later novels, Gavin Stevens’s success as an attorney, Faulkner’s depiction of legal disputes is, by and large, informed by communal customs that matter more than abstract justice and the rule of law. For Yoknapatawpha county citizens the pursuit of justice is, to paraphrase Gavin Stevens’s famous statement, not concerned with truth but with justice as they see it.<sup>8</sup> The very predicament of legal institutions and procedures culminating in unfair trials allows the local community to resort to violence, vigilantism and lynchings outside formal law.<sup>9</sup>

## THE BARN

The chronotope of the barn sets up the two pivotal criminal actions in both *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Sanctuary* (1931), and will assume even greater importance in the short story “Barn Burning”, first published in *Harper’s* in 1939. The writing of “Barn Burning” began as a first chapter of *The Hamlet*, the novel that marks the beginning of

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<sup>7</sup> Faulkner’s familiarity with the legal profession is also connected to his biography and to his family history: his grandfather, John Wesley Thompson Falkner (“The Young Colonel”), his uncle, cousins, and many friends were all lawyers. (Watson 1993: 6, 7)

<sup>8</sup> Gavin Stevens’s evolution as county prosecutor in novels of the 1940s and 50s will lead him to espouse a subjective form of justice (Fulton 29), searching “not so much truth as of justice, or of justice as he sees it” (*Requiem* 505). The character of Gavin Stevens will be the protagonist of the stories collected in *Knight’s Gambit* (1949), and the already mentioned *Requiem for a Nun*, and *The Hamlet*. See Hannon 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Lynching is structured around the foundational myth of the South, that is white suprematism, and can be read in the light of the two central obsessions of that myth, purity of blood and the rape of the white woman. See Hoefler (2012: 41).



the Snopes trilogy (Skei 1999: 55). As further proof of the longevity of the barn chronotope in Faulkner's fiction, the short story is built around Abner Snopes's various attempts at barn burning, and opens on a rural courtroom where he is accused of burning down his landlord's barn.

In *Faulkner and the Great Depression*, Ted Atkinson deals with the recurrent motif of "barn burning" by drawing on anthropological and economic studies of the phenomenon that describe populism as one of its main factor. *As I Lay Dying* is a case in point; with Anse Bundren – Addie's widower and father of all the children (but Jewel) – as a somewhat unaware mouthpiece of the populist anger of small farmers and sharecroppers hit by the agricultural crisis:

It's a hard country on man; it's hard. Eight miles of sweat of his body washed up outen the Lord's earth, where the Lord himself told him to put it. Nowhere in this sinful world can a honest, hardworking man profit. It takes them that runs the stores in the towns, doing no sweating, living off of them that sweats. It aint the hardworking man, the farmer. (Faulkner 1985a: 71)

Anse's populist exasperation – similar thoughts are uttered by Abner in "Barn Burning" – is an instance of social frustration with laws and legal institutions on the part of white small farmers. Barn burning – with barn as the very symbol of the agricultural crisis – thus corresponds to the violent and unorganized outcome of that resentment. In Faulkner's fiction, the chronotope of barn burning is therefore instrumental to the representation of a populist, individual, unorganized, and socially sterile form of protest. The revolutionary potential of a collective action against landowners and corporate power is deadened by destructive violence ultimately aimed at not changing the *status quo ante*. In his study of Snopesian crimes, Bertram Wyatt-Brown has accurately argued that Southern law hardly ever punished barn burnings, leniently tolerating them as "misdeeds of anonymity and insignificance" (Wyatt-Brown 1982: 178) that is, ineffective individual gestures presenting no real threat to private property (176-178).

When Darl burns down Gillespie's barn in *As I Lay Dying* his act does not, once again, stem from a communal, shared form of protest against property. Darl's act of arson is the insular outcry of a single member of a dispossessed family. Aimed at incinerating Addie's rotting corpse and putting an end to the Bundrens' burial journey, his incendiary act is instrumental to the private needs of a single family (Atkinson 2006: 160).

As Albert C. Smith asserts in "'Southern Violence Reconsidered': Arson as Protest in Black Belt Georgia, 1865-1910", the social uneasiness that results in arsons and human burnings also underlie associated actions of murders and rapes (Smith 1985: 536) which are, in turn, very frequent in Faulkner's novels. Rape, murder, barn, and human burning are tightly woven together to form the noir/Gothic imagery of *Sanctuary*. In Faulkner's "potboiler", the chronotope of the barn is not synonymous



with burning but with murder and rape, though burning is only postponed to Lee Goodwin's lynching by the townsfolk after the jury finds him unjustly guilty of the facts of the barn.

In *As I Lay Dying*, barns are shelters for the night during the Bundren family's journey to Jefferson. After surviving severe floodings and crossing a river over a flooded bridge, the Bundrens spend the night at Gillespie's barn with Addie's rapidly decaying body. Darl, the most nuanced character of the novel and the one delivering 19 of its 59 monologues, then tries to terminate the insane and noxious mission by burning down the barn (and the coffin). In a few hours, the barn ceases to be a sheltering place and is transformed into a burning hell, witnessing an apocalyptic rage. Vardaman, the youngest Bundren child, evokes the cataclysmic moment through the flames reaching up to the sky, and the stars moving backwards (Faulkner 1985a: 151); a similar/specular image will be used by Faulkner in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* to describe the Mississippi river running backwards in its furious flood.

The chronotope of the barn serves yet another function in *Sanctuary*, where it covers one fifth of the whole narration (chapters 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). The corn-crib of the barn attached to Goodwin's bootlegging house is, in fact, the setting of Temple Drake's rape. Sexually impotent, Popeye rapes her with a corncob after killing the dimwitted Tommy who has tried to protect her. Goodwin's mob lynching will add more barbarity to Popeye's violence. The very rape scene is elliptically evoked in chapter 13 through Temple's broken words, "Something is happening to me" and "I told you":

She could hear silence in a thick rustling as he moved toward her through it, thrusting aside, and she began to say *Something is going to happen to me*. She was saying it to the old man with the yellow clots for eyes. "*Something is happening to me!*" she screamed at him, sitting in his chair in the sunlight, his hands crossed on the top of the stick. "*I told you it was!*" she screamed [...] "*I told you! I told you I told you all the time!*" (Faulkner 1931: 250, emphasis added)

Sabine Sielke contends that Temple's use of different tenses reproduces the protracted violence she suffers in time – what happens has been foreseen and is going to happen again (Sielke 2002: 87). In this never-ending violence, Temple's address to Pap ("the old man") – probably Goodwin's blind and dumb father – can be read as a projection of the ambiguous and dysfunctional role of the father in white supremacist culture; witness, protector, and aggressor at once, Pap (like Temple's own father, Judge Drake) is unable to defend the only sanctuary of Southern culture, that is the little belle (Sielke: 90-91). Analogously, Ted Atkinson speaks of Temple's rape as the incarnation of an "endangered rule of law" and "vulnerability of the body politic and a crisis in the system of law and order" (Atkinson 2006: 130). If Temple is treated like a trophy girl, as the symbol of Mississippi's old aristocracy, her rape consequently means questioning that system.





The factual impotence of law incarnated by Horace Benbow and his narrative is thoroughly reversed by Popeye's ubiquitous surveillance. Goodwin's house, the barn and, finally, Miss Reba's brothel are places of muffled voices, silences, secret rooms and locked doors that are constantly pried open. Popeye's realm resembles a Panopticon: Temple cannot escape it, and the rule of law (as embodied by Judge Drake and Benbow) cannot enter it.

### THE 'SHUTTERED' HOUSE

Collapsing, shut, abandoned, or inhabited by the often mentally impaired descendants of Yoknapatawpha families,<sup>10</sup> 'shuttered' houses constitute a sort of structural backbone of Faulkner's novels. Specifically, in *Sanctuary* and *Light in August* houses are portrayed as secret, labyrinthine spaces marked by physical and psychological violence, pathological forms of sexuality, and death. Located on the geographical and social margins of town and community, Faulkner's shuttered houses are entangling spaces for dwellers and visitors alike: caught in the snare, they occasionally try to run away after burning them down.

In *Sanctuary*, both Goodwin's decrepit house and Miss Reba's house of prostitution in Memphis are described as Popeye's ubiquitous apparatus of control over Temple. A student of Ole Miss, she is defined as a "fast girl" with several suitors and she ends up at the Old Frenchman Place by chance, after a date with Gowan Stevens – Gavin Stevens's nephew – who drinks heavily and decides to set out to find some moonshine. After spending the night at Goodwin's house, Stevens leaves in the morning abandoning Temple. The chapters set at Goodwin's place (6, 7, 8, 9) are dominated by Temple's olfactory and auditory perceptions; from this point onwards, her sight will be more and more limited and partial because of Popeye's panopticon asymmetry:

She heard the door open. [...] She could tell all of them by the way they breathed. Then, without having heard, felt, the door open, she began to smell something: the brilliantine which Popeye used on his hair. [...] She could hear no sound from the shucks [...]. (Faulkner 1985b: 234)

No one, in or around this place, can escape Popeye's omnipresence and forced surveillance. In the semi-dark interiors of Goodwin's house Temple must soon learn to privilege senses (of hearing, smell and touch) and suprasegmental signs (tone, pitch, rhythm) over verbal communication. Her own survival will be possible only as long as she refuses to speak and to tell the real story of her rape in court.

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<sup>10</sup> See the Compsons' house in *The Sound and the Fury*.



When Temple reaches Miss Reba's brothel, dragged by Popeye (who is a well-known gangster in Memphis), she is still half-conscious and bleeding after the rape. Popeye's surveillance gets even more thorough, and Temple's lucidity thinner and thinner. Now permanently drunk, heavily drugged, and chain-smoking, the former college girl becomes a sex slave. Miss Reba's shuttered house – "a virtual labyrinth of locked doors, prying eyes, and inquisitive ears, a textbook example of what Foucault calls the Panopticon" (Watson 1993: 62) – is filled with indistinguishable sounds:

Temple rose from the bed. Holding the towel about her she stole toward the door, *her ears acute, her eyes a little blind with the strain of listening*. [...] She reached the door. At once she began to *hear a hundred conflicting sounds* in a single converging threat [...]

She found that *she was hearing* her watch; had been hearing it for some time. She discovered that *the house was full of noises*, seeping into the room *muffled and indistinguishable*, as though from a distance. [...] *The house was full of sounds. Indistinguishable, remote*, they came in to her with a quality of awakening, resurgence, as though the house itself had been asleep, rousing itself with dark [...]. (Faulkner 1985b: 285, 287, emphasis added)

Popeye's character shares many affinities with 1920s and 1930s portraits of American gangsters as invincible figures above the law (Atkinson 2006: 118, 133). The violence he exerts on Temple does not end with the rape but continues even more deviously at Miss Reba's. Becoming totally subdued to Popeye and pathologically unable to get rid of her attraction to him, Temple will give false testimony at Goodwin's trial, accusing Goodwin of the facts of the barn, and thus saving Popeye, the real murderer and rapist, instead of him.

In *Light in August*, the 'shuttered' house is located on the outskirts of town, owned and inhabited by a social outcast, Joanna Burden, for whom it will turn into a deadly trap. Joanna Burden is the descendant of a prominent New England family of abolitionists, and a black rights activist herself; she has lived in Jefferson an almost marginalized existence, in an otherwise almost inviolable house. Things change when Joe Christmas hires a cabin on her property, and the two start a loving affair.

Theirs is, again, a non-verbal relationship, one nearly utterly consumed on the physical level. First revived by sexual awakening, Joanna will experience a double conversion – from spinster through nymphomaniac to religious fanatic – and will be finally devoured by a growing sense of guilt as soon as Christmas confesses to her that he may be part black. In a feverish climax taking place at her house, she threatens Christmas with an old pistol and misfires, and he cuts her throat. He then sets the house ablaze and flies away. Joe Christmas, who has a white skin but an ambiguous racial identity (still a child he was treated like the illegitimate son of a white woman and a black man), has come to Jefferson after a tormented story. A foundling abandoned by his fanatic grandfather, a very sad child who spent his early years at an



orphanage to be then adopted by sternly Calvinist foster parents, a teenager suffering from physical beatings and constant psychological abuse on the part of the father who he ends up killing, Joe Christmas will finally grow into a troubled adult on the run.

With this story of uprooting, non-belonging, and violence, Christmas arrives in Jefferson, finds a job at the sawmill in the black part of the town, and starts a bootlegging business with his workmate Lucas Burch (alias Joe Brown). His affair with Joanna Burden is literally confined to her house, a walled sepulcher that Joe can enter only stealthily, like a stranger violating the embattled chasteness of both its space and her body:

One day he realised that she had never invited him inside the house proper. He had never been further than the kitchen [...] he felt like a thief, a robber, even while he mounted to the bedroom where she waited. Even after a year it was as though he entered by stealth to despoil her virginity each time anew. [...]

But beneath his hands the body might have been the body of a dead woman not yet stiffened. (Faulkner 1985c: 571, 573)

Joanna's mystical turn and her supposed pregnancy trigger Joe's long-seething anger ("He did not go in eagerness but in quiet rage", Faulkner 1985c: 572), urging him out of those suffocating walls ("I better move. I better get away from here", 591). Joanna's murder and the burning of her home are evoked through ellipsis in the last lines of chapter 12. In spite of noticeable textual reticence about Joe's actual killing Joanna and setting the house afire – (Sternberg 1978: 100) – the sheriff's investigation follows a racial lead when he learns from Burch that Christmas is partly black. Burch's merely conjectural claim – and one made in the hope to collect a \$ 1,000 reward – about Joe's assumed blackness is enough not only to pervert the course of justice but also to spark local white supremacist rage.

The lynch mob led by Percy Grimm (a Mississippi National Guard captain, part-time "peace-keeper" vigilante, and fanatic white supremacist) will take action against Christmas – just escaped from jail while awaiting trial, therefore still technically innocent – as the murder *and* rapist of a white woman. By savagely castrating Christmas, Grimm is avenging the rape of a white woman who is *now* posited as part and symbol of the whole white community. The racial taboo of a white woman's murder is powerful enough to transform an outcast spinster who has always been treated like a Jefferson pariah because of her support of the black cause into a respectable martyr (Al-Barhow 2010: 54). The mysterious meeting of the Grand Jury that has to consider the charges against Joe Christmas is described, again, in terms of asymmetrical judgement. Even though they both share a marginal status within the community of Jefferson, Joe and Joanna are not equal before the law. The racial prejudice weighing on the former condemns him in spite of missing evidence ("a man whom few of them had ever seen to *know*", to know, that is, to discern, discriminate and, therefore, to judge):



[...] the Grand Jury was preparing behind locked doors to take the life of a man whom few of them had ever seen to know, for having taken the life of a woman whom even fewer of them had known to see. (Faulkner 1985c: 706, emphasis added)

The shuttered house in *Light in August* is both tomb and sacrificial altar. Joanna Burden's death marks in fact her rebirth as the victim of black man's criminal actions within the white community. By taking over the due course of law, the unwritten codes of consuetudinary law justify Joe Christmas's lynching and castration as necessary condition for the white woman's rehabilitation. No house is shuttered enough to protect a black man passing as white and accused of murdering and raping a white woman.

## THE RIVER

"Old Man" – a popular nickname for the Mississippi river – is the title of one of the two plots composing *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, and introduces the horizontal chronotope of the river as absolutely central to the story.

Faulkner is not new to double plots, yet "Old Man" and "The Wild Palms" are parallel stories that never meet if not, symbolically, at Parchman Farm, the penitentiary of Mississippi where the two male protagonists wind up over a decade apart. Although it is introduced through precise spatio-temporal references – "Mississippi; May, flood year 1927" – the "Old Man" narrative "has the purity of an early myth" (Rueckert 2004: 129), presenting unnamed characters ("the tall convict", "the plump convict", "the Cajan", "the woman", etc.). "Old Man" does not belong to the Yoknapatawpha novels and tales – the story takes place slightly further South and does not present any of the characters of the saga, nevertheless, according to Cleanth Brooks, it would not be that far from Yoknapatawpha County either, thanks to its protagonist, the tall convict, "the kind of person who might have been bred and brought up in Beat Four" (Brooks 1989: 206).<sup>11</sup>

The story of the tall convict – sentenced to fifteen years of forced labor in the State penitentiary at Parchman for a train robbery – comes at a possible crossroad during the Mississippi flood, an exceptional event that turns him loose and gives him the opportunity to escape prison and be free.

With the flood breaking the levees and the convicts evacuated, the tall convict – a model inmate so far – is asked to go and search for a pregnant woman trapped in a

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<sup>11</sup> Beat Four is a section of the map of Yoknapatawpha: "Across the central part of Yoknapatawpha are the Pine Hills, the eastern part of which lies in the minor civil division known as Beat Four. The area is the roadless, almost perpendicular hill country inhabited by McCallums, Gowries, Fraziers, and Muirs [...] No blacks reside in Beat Four, and strangers are not welcome". (Aiken 2009: 40)



tree. The cataclysmic fury of the flood will thus be the scenario for the tall convict's heroic rescue of the woman and the delivery of her baby.

The unpredictability of the flood creates the conditions for a subversion of the law; the river, the open chronotope that interrupts the strict rule of the chain gang, provides the convict the chance to escape his future of confinement by setting him free not to report back to the penitentiary. As a chronotope of possibility, the river is thus juxtaposed to Parchman Farm, chronotope of immutability and containment that quintessentially allows no exception to the rule. A former slave plantation situated in the Yazoo-Mississippi delta, The Mississippi State Penitentiary of Parchman has maintained a brutal surveillance apparatus on a racially mixed inmate population:

[...] (there is *no walled penitentiary* in Mississippi; it is a cotton plantation which the convicts work under the rifles and shotguns of guards and trusties). [...]

Perhaps what actually moved them were the accounts of the conscripted levee gangs, *mixed blacks and whites working in double shifts* against the steadily rising water; stories of men, even though they were negroes, being forced like themselves to do work for which they received no other pay than coarse food and a place in mudfloored tent to sleep on [...]. (Faulkner 1990: 21, 25, emphasis added)

Although it is evoked as an open space ("no walled penitentiary") Parchman Farm does not allow chain gang members to have any contact with the natural surroundings. Forced to labor for levee work along the Mississippi River, inmates have never seen its water:

Instead and for the first time he looked at the River within whose shadow he had spent the last seven years of his life but had never seen before; he stood in quiet and amazed surmise and looked at the rigid steel-colored surface [...] (Faulkner 1990: 62)

Caught between two opposing chronotopes – the river and the penitentiary – the tall convict opts for the latter, the confined male society of the prison, and does so after what Cecelia Tichi calls "a rite-of-passage [...] to responsible manhood" in which he saves the lives of a woman and her baby and ideally gains rehabilitation as a citizen. Ironically, "the convict's 'reward'", continues Tichi, "is ten years added to his sentence" for trumpeted attempted escape (Tichi 2005: 12). A man deeply upset by the unknown female world and a virgin, he returns to his secluded and secure place in prison, finally far from women and their troubling presence:

[...] he began to paddle in that direction which he believed to be downstream, where he knew there were towns [...] smaller towns whose names he did not know but where there would be people, houses, something, anything he might



reach and surrender his charge to and turn his back on her forever, on all pregnant and female life forever and *return to that monastic existence of shotguns and shackles where he would be secure from it*. (Faulkner 1990: 130, emphasis added)

## THE FIRE

From its title – a durative telic gerund that like Faulkner’s other gerunds “enact ongoing traumas occurring on continuously contested terrain” (Schmidt 2015: 179) – *As I Lay Dying* is built on a series of expanded satellites, monologic considerations on Addie’s death articulated mainly on her burial journey to Jefferson. With such a structure – a sequence of monologues – it is impossible and unproductive to analyze narrative kernels. In fact, the very kernel of the whole narrative, Addie’s death, is given at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, the unique aesthetics of the novel lies in the rejection of any possible unitary perspective; the events are refracted in 59 chapters and 15 different characters – the members of the Bundren family, some neighbors, doctors, people met along the way – whose alternating monologic voices represent the community perspective.

The chronotopes of the journey and of the road, the community perspective, the story of a matriarchal family: the analogies with Steinbeck’s later epic of the Joads are significant. The Bundren family fights against impossible odds and manages to stay together. Yet the Bundrens, unlike the Joads, do not go through any personal or collective growth in terms of awareness of social injustice and potential protest against it. Darl’s very incendiary act – that could be read as an act of resistance, if an ambiguous one (Atkinson writes that it is difficult to understand if “an illegal act or an instance of necessary revolution”, Atkinson 2006: 186) – is curbed by law enforcement, in complicity with the rest of the Bundren’s family, not as a crime but as an act of deviant behavior. The only member of the family endowed with a sense of discernment and lucidity is thus interned at a sanitarium and consigned to passive dementia:

Darl

Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams.

“Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes”. (Faulkner 1930:172-173)

Not only none of the Bundrens will develop any solidarity in terms of social and political awareness of injustice, but Anse’s choice to surrender Darl to a sanitarium for starting the fire is to be read as a submission to the state apparatus. Darl would thus become, in Patrick O’ Donnell’s words, “the sacrifice paid to the State so that the



Bundrens can complete their epic journey and continue with business as usual" (O' Donnell 1991-92: 90).

The human pyre that burns Goodwin alive in *Sanctuary* belongs to yet another form of cleansing action against a threat to white Southern society. Triggered by a rape, Goodwin's death by burning arrives at the end of the novel, in chapter 29, immediately after the verdict declaring him guilty. Whipped up by anger at the violation of a racial taboo (the rape of a white woman), the lynch mob undermines the rule of law and the sentence of the court by replacing them. It is not by chance that Goodwin's burning takes place near the Courthouse, the symbolic centre of Yoknapatawpha county.<sup>12</sup>

The last chapter of the novel, almost a narrative coda, contains a further enactment of the triangular association of fire, law, and trial. After managing to commit two murders (Tommy's and Red's, the young man who is Temple's lover at Miss Reba's) and one rape and to get away with them, Popeye is ironically convicted and hanged for a crime he did not commit. On his way to visit his mother in Pensacola (Florida), Popeye is in fact accused of the murder of a policeman in Birmingham, Alabama. The irony of circumstance is even greater considering that the murder occurred the same night that Popeye killed Red. In other words, Popeye could establish his innocence only by confessing to another murder.

At this point, a flashback sketches Popeye's childhood by telling how he survived the fire of the family home started by his paranoid grandmother, and how the fire stunted his physical development making him sexually impotent. Violent and criminal acts are thus circularly inscribed in the chronotope of the fire that encompasses the starting (Popeye's fire) and ending point (Goodwin's burning at the stake) of the story of multiple murders and protracted rape.

In the four chronotopes that structurally define *Sanctuary* – Goodwin's house and adjacent barn, Miss Reba's bothel, the Jefferson Courthouse – characters do not embrace any alternative or antagonistic conception of established law as embodied by the courtrooms – quintessential places of injustice (in both Goodwin and Popeye's later trial), and Horace Benbow, an honest but unsuccessful lawyer. Furthermore, Popeye's ubiquitous and total surveillance, as well as his passive final surrender to justice for the wrong murder, are possible only through the connivance of ineffective law. And yet, for all the characters' acquiescence in accepting the shortcomings of legal institutions that are incapable of preventing violent acts by punishing their real perpetrators, the central point of view of the whole novel is Horace Benbow's, the sole moral counterpoint to Popeye's immorality. Prevailing over both flawed law (Goodwin's trial, Popeye's arrest and hanging) and the impotence of restorative justice (Benbow's work), is the unofficial law of the community that justifies the lynching of an innocent man on the basis of sympathy for a victim who is a white college girl and the

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<sup>12</sup> See the description of the courthouse in *Requiem for a Nun* (Faulkner 1951: 460).



daughter of an eminent judge. Temple Drake's false testimony at Goodwin's trial closes the case and is never questioned by the town.

From a narratological perspective, Goodwin's burning at the stake is not a catalyst chronotope as it does not trigger any change. If anything, it ratifies an already written sentence. The real vertical kernel, Temple's rape at the hand of Popeye in Goodwin's barn (ch. 13), is preceded and followed by a series of satellites and minor kernels (Goodwin in jail, ch. 16; Benbow's visit to Temple at Miss Reba's, ch. 23).

A second narrative climax is reached with the chronotope of the trial (ch. 27 and 28). With the exception of recurring legal jargon ("The honorable Circuit Court of Yoknapatawpha county is now open according to law..."; "I offer as evidence this object..."); the atmosphere of the trial and the courtroom is mostly evoked through the hissing presence of the public and the overpowering musty smell of the room (Faulkner 1985b: 374). As soon as the trial is over and the verdict declaring Goodwin guilty is announced, the muffled murmuring of the public – "The room breathed: a buzzing sound like a wind getting up" – gives rise to the barbarous anger of Goodwin's burning (ch. 29) described through Horace Benbow's point of view (his hopeless defense lawyer):

When he went down the corridor toward the stairs he did not know he was running until he heard beyond a door a voice say, "Fire! It's a... ..". [...] "It's a fire," Horace said. He could see the glare; against it the jail loomed in stark and savage silhouette. [...] Horace ran. Ahead of him he saw other figures running, turning into the alley beside the jail; then he heard the sound of the fire; the furious sound of gasoline. [...] Against the flames black figures showed, antic; he could hear panting shouts [...] From one side of the circle came the screams of the man about whom the coal oil can had exploded, but from the central mass of fire there came no sound at all. [...]

"It's his lawyer."

"Here's the man that defended him. That tried to get him clear."

"Put him in, too. *There's enough left to burn a lawyer.*" (Faulkner 1985b: 384, emphasis added)

The novel closes on two satellites focused respectively on Benbow and Popeye. The thumbnail sketch regarding Popeye's childhood contains, like a *mise en abyme*, a fire, a trial, and an unjust execution. The double – juridical and popular – injustice at work in Goodwin's case will be partly redressed only once the narration of the events is closed, that is, first through Popeye's late arrest for the wrong murder, and second through *Requiem for a Nun* that constitutes a sort of narrative sequel to *Sanctuary*. Faulkner started writing his most experimental novel *Requiem for a Nun* in 1933 but published it twenty years later. A play in three acts with a prose superstructure, it rotates around Temple Drake and Gowan Stevens, now a married couple, and the trial of their nurse, Nancy Mannigoe, a black prostitute Temple had met at Miss Reba's, who is accused of





murdering their six-month-old daughter and sentenced to death. In spite of the ambiguities of the verdict, after the trial Temple confesses to Gavin Stevens (Mannigoe's defense attorney and Gowan's uncle) that she was partly responsible for the murder of her own baby.

The only form of justice allowed to Goodwin – though a very equivocal one – is a kind of retroactive, fate's revenge punishing Temple's false testimony eight years after the first trial. Conversely, the ever returning presentness of the past continues to haunt Temple – the former nymphet converted into sexual slave after being brutally raped – whose own requiem is the result of the combined action of official law, customary law, and their resistance to the reforming force of historical and human justice. Neither Horace Benbow nor Gavin Stevens succeed in their cases.

In *As I Lay Dying* and *Sanctuary*, law operates, respectively, after (Darl's internment in a sanitarium) and before (Goodwin's trial precedes his burning by a lynch mob) the chronotope of the fire. In *Light in August*, the burning of Joanna Burden's house is the catalyst chronotope that structures the second plot – Joe Christmas's story – and provides a chronological frame to the first one – Lena Grove's story. Pregnant and on her way to find the father of her baby, Lena is the first character of the novel to catch sight of the fire from the distance, upon her arrival to Jefferson. According to Doreen Fowler, the story of Lena and Hightower (the retired reverend who will help her to deliver her baby) “appear to form concentric circles around a horrific center, the murder of Joanna Burden, as if the dark narrative at the novel's core needed somehow to be contained” (Fowler 1997: 64). The novel's *dark* narrative is such not only for the violent events that it represents but also for the racial pattern underlying them. Whereas Lena's story recalls the circular journey of *As I Lay Dying* (and notable analogies with Dewey Dell) without engaging in overt racial discourses, Joe Christmas's whole parable revolves around his racial identity. Official (the sheriff) and unofficial (Percy Grimm) law take action in the aftermath of a murder inextricably connected to a fire and possibly linked to a rape: the victim of all the alleged crimes is a white woman, the alleged suspect a black/mulatto passing as white (Faulkner 1985c: 657).

Institutional law – displayed in a regular trial with jury – is here undermined and taken over by the savage violence of a fanatic white supremacist who nevertheless sets forth as a champion of established power and law:<sup>13</sup>

His idea, his words, were quite simple and direct. “We got to preserve order,” he said. “We must let the law take its course. The law, the nation. It is the right of no

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<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, William Faulkner will compare Percy Grimm to a proto-nazi (quoted in Brinkmeyer 1995: 92). In the novel Percy Grimm is described as a man with: “[...] a sublime and implicit faith in physical courage and blind obedience, and a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men [...]” (Faulkner 1932: 732-733).



*civilian to sentence a man to death. And we, the soldiers in Jefferson, are the ones to see to that.*" (Faulkner 1985c: 733, emphasis added)

The fire is introduced through prolepsis in chapters 2 and 4, and returns in chapter 12. From chapter 6 to chapter 11, the narration of the events leaps backwards, focusing on Joe Christmas's childhood. The vertical kernels preparing the ground for material (fire/murder) and metaphorical (Christmas's anger) detonations are contained in a narrative chiasmus between the end of chapter 5 (Joe's flight on the hill from which he sees Freedman Town and his words "I'm going to do something")<sup>14</sup> and the end of chapter 11 (his encounter with Joanna and the sense of oppression deriving from it, and, again, "I have got to do something"). Between chapter 5 and 11, a six-chapter segment of narration meant to show how Christmas's existence – from childhood to adolescence through the more recent events – has been marked by long-repressed social uneasiness, a perturbed relationship with both women and religion, and, mostly, an unsettled racial identity. Chapter 12 offers a more direct description of the catalyst chronotope of the fire, featuring the intervention of the Sheriff, and is followed by a host of satellite-chapters – Christmas's flight, his surrender in Mottstown, the exchanges between Hightower and Doc Hines, and the official talk by police officers and sheriffs in front of the crowd.

In turn, these satellite-chapters lead to the other kernel of the novel, Joe Christmas's lynching at the hand of Grimm (ch. 18). With the exception of chapter 19, that contains Gavin Stevens's chronicle of the whole story (juxtaposed to the description of Joe Christmas's lynching and castration), comments regarding the actions of official law are uttered mostly by the crowd functioning like a Greek chorus. The doxa of the Jefferson community conveys skepticism, if not hostility, towards the execution of the legal and judicial proceedings regarding Joe Christmas. The sheer possibility that a black man can act *as if* he were white – thus deconstructing the usual "white/nigger" binary opposition<sup>15</sup> – constitutes an ongoing obsession for the white community whose popular morality is evoked as a structural counterpoint to the words spoken by officers, lawyers, and judges.

Joe Christmas's story is told by a third person narrator that constantly incorporates the talk of the Jefferson and Mottstown's communities, thus producing compelling narrative ripples:

*But the word had already got around that they were there, and there must have been two hundred men and boys and women too in front of the jail when the two*

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<sup>14</sup> On the African-american community of Freedman Town – ("[...] a region of negro cabins and gutted and outworn fields out of which a corporal's guard of detectives could not have combed ten people [...]", Faulkner 1932: 611) – see Al-Barhow 2010: 68.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Kazin has described Joe Christmas's confused racial identity as "a tabula rasa, a white sheet of paper on which anyone can write out an identity for him and make him believe it". See Robinson 2003: 123.



sheriffs come out onto the porch and *our* sheriff made a speech, asking the folks to respect the law and that him and the Jefferson sheriff both promised *that the nigger would get a quick and fair trial; and then somebody in the crowd says, 'Fair, hell. Did he give that white woman a fair trial?'* And they hollered then, crowding up, like they were hollering for one another to the dead woman and not to the sheriffs. (Faulkner 1985c: 661, emphasis added)

Here we have an example of a recurrent shifting narrative pattern: from the indirect speech reporting the sheriff's discourse ("asking the folks to respect the law...that the nigger would get a quick and fair trial") to the present tense introducing the words of a man in the crowd ("and then somebody in the crowd says..."). The shift from indirect speech in the past tense and direct speech in the present tense is provoked by the word "nigger".

Captured, killed, and emasculated – "without evidence or trial [...] and for a violation of the most sacred of racial taboos"–, Joe Christmas is cursed because he belongs to a category of people, *niggers*, "who were not owed the niceties of trials" (Sagarin and Kelly 1985: 20).

Echoes of the voice of the crowd – "Fair, hell. Did he give that white woman a fair trial?" – can be detected in Grimm's blind violence in chapter 19, as witnessed by the members of the local posse:

When they approached to see what was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. "*Now you'll let the women alone, even in hell,*" he said. (Faulkner 1985c: 742, emphasis added)

Grimm's sadistic abuse appalls his own men and the citizens. And yet, the town – "acquiescent chorus in the drama that unfolds on its streets" (Sykes 1989: 81) must ultimately acknowledge that Grimm, by seeking an extralegal and bloody form of justice, has acted in the interest of the community.

## THE FLOOD

From a structural perspective, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* takes the double-plot device used in *Light in August* to its extreme, with the two stories ("The Wild Palms", and Old Man") presenting two different time and place settings. A second similarity between the two novels can be found in the fact that one of the plots has a more straightforward narrative line than the other (Lena's story and "Old Man" unravel in relative chronological progression whereas Joe Christmas's story and "The Wild Palms" are more experimental, articulated through flashback and flashforward techniques).



For all their differences, the two plots of the novel do share some motifs, such as the presence of male virgins (Harry Wilbourne and the tall convict) and pregnant women (Charlotte Rittenmayer, whose abortion operation by Harry is ill-fated; and the unnamed woman of "Old Man", who delivers her baby in the midst of the great Mississippi flood of 1927 rescued and helped by the tall convict). The central chronotope of "Old Man" is the river, juxtaposed to the chronotope of the penitentiary and hosting the chronotope of the flood.

There is no narrative preparation to the catalyst chronotope of the flood, that is given *in medias res* at the very beginning of the story. The overflowing fluidity of the water element is reflected in the extreme liquidity of narration in which events literally fluctuate along the exceptional situation. In such a narrative frame the search for kernels and satellites is to no avail.

During the flood, given the chance to break free from jail, the tall convict chooses nevertheless to report back to the penitentiary, thus favoring the certainty and predictability of punishment over the disquieting uncertainty of freedom. The absurdity of his treatment once he is back to Parchman – where, instead of being rewarded for his heroic deeds and set free, he is accused of attempted escape for a bureaucratic quibble – is perfectly aligned with the depiction of law enforcement in the rest of the story. Faulkner's "caustic treatment of officialdom" and his "outrage at social injustice in America" (Tichi 2005: 12) becomes quite trenchant in the description of the plump convict's sentence to 199 years:

None of his fellow prisoners knew what his crime had been, save that he was in for a hundred and ninety-nine years – this incredible and impossible period of punishment or restraint itself carrying a vicious and fabulous quality which indicated that his reason for being here was such that the very men, the paladins and pillars of justice and equality who had sent him here had during that moment become blind apostles not of mere justice but of all human decency, *blind instruments not of equity but of all human outrage and vengeance, acting in a savage personal concert, judge, lawyer and jury, which certainly abrogated justice and possibly even law.* (Faulkner 1990: 23, emphasis added)

Justice is not given within the law, but is a matter of "savage personal concert" instrumental to "human outrage and vengeance", blindly administered by self-righteous "paladins and pillars of justice and equality". Still, law is the convict's only *ubi consistam*:

"They are going to have to add ten years to your time."

"All right," the convict said.

"It's hard luck. I'm sorry."

"All right," the convict said, "If that's the rule." (Faulkner 1990: 280)



The tall convict's almost unperturbed acceptance of his additional sentence can be read in the light of Jerome Frank's famous theory of law as father-substitute. In his groundbreaking 1930's *Law and the Modern Mind*, the father of legal realism studied the importance of psychological factors on legal figures. For all its partiality and fallibility, law works as a partial substitute for the father as infallible judge.<sup>16</sup>

Paradoxically, in Parchman social enclave, the tall convict is "afforded ways of surviving in a confused and unjust world" (Williamson 1993: 428).

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<sup>16</sup> "One day, said Frank, the break occurs: the child finds his father is not the governor, the arbiter of the universe. The child carries, however, in growing to adulthood the longings for stability in an uncertain world. This longing he fastens upon the law: it becomes the father substitute." (Hopkins 1983: 56)



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