

Poor Whites as the Trigger of Tragedy
in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*

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Introduction

The lingering subsistence of the "poor whites" in the Southern society of the twentieth century still exerts a characteristic influence upon the literary works of the South. You see, for instance, peculiar characteristics in the poor white inventor, Hugh McVey through whose life Sherwood Anderson describes the degradation of an Ohio farming community in *Poor White*, and in Caldwell's Jeeter Lester and his family (*Tobacco Road*), Ty Ty and his children (*God's Little Acre*). Not few of the social novels and short stories in the South present us the tension and conflict between the white and Negro, and the novels or stories of the poor whites, mixing themselves in between humorously or metaphorically, are weaving a thematic tapestry of Southern Literary Renaissance.

The "poor whites" in William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) play not only the mixing and coloring agents but sometimes a key role to trigger the white people's doom in the tragic society of the South. The present paper, therefore, tries to discuss first, the characteristics of the poor whites through the representative characters in the Southern literary works, and second, the triggering role of the poor whites in the two Faulkner's works.

I. Poor White's Pride in Human Dignity

"A white South" is often described as "consisting of plantation grandees at the top and wretchedly deprived poor farmers at the bottom. (Both groups, although in fact large, were outnumbered by small yeoman farmers)" and these "wretchedly deprived poor farmers of the white South... were shrewd, somewhat bizarre, clay eaters who practiced emotional religion and engaged in violent eye gougings ... and ... were often prone to vote for racist demagogues." (*Encyclopedia of Southern*

Culture') It seems, indeed, that they are leading a desperate life, but still, when it comes to the notion of competing with the blacks, they do not decline nor give up to lose the dignity of white class however much their lives are alike. They do not even admit that they are socially as incompetent as the blacks, and this psychological dilemma has been accelerated in the conflicting consciousness of the poor whites.

The interpretation of this sort of psychological conflict of the poor whites against blacks brings us back to the American society in the earlier centuries when blacks were not treated as human beings. It was only after the Civil War (1861-65) that laws admitted slaves should be treated as 'human beings'². This situation marked a critical period in history where there was no more legal ground to insist that whites stand above colored people. However, it still took many more years for the social conscience to admit their equality, and the notion of white supremacy has persisted well into the twentieth century, ironically enough more strongly among poor whites. Blacks had always been their counterpart, especially on large plantations where even house negroes took pride in their status much higher than that of field hands. Whenever poor whites had anything ever to do with owners of plantations, it was always their slaves who they had to first encounter and get insulted. As a result, the poor whites have come to bear a strong psychological force in Southern literature.

Poverty-stricken as he is, Jeeter Lester in Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* has a strong belief in the soil and in his god. His farmland in Georgia, which once belonged to his grandfather seventy-five years ago and brought a large profit during the heyday of tobacco cultivation, belongs to him no more, but he and his family continues to live in a dilapidated house on the farm by the mercy of the owner who abandoned the worn-out plot *and* his sharecropper, the Lesters. Jeeter and his wife Ada had seventeen children, five of them died, and nine, either fled from them or married to be got rid of, and the remaining three are Pearl, who married Lov at the age of twelve, idiotic Dude and harelippped Ellie May. Jeeter lives with Ada, Dude, Ellie May and his mother on the farm, spending day after day, waiting for the seed-time (although he never sows), and wishing someone would lend him a mule and tools (which nobody would ever do) so that he could plow the land. Despite the fact that after decades of abuse, the soil is ruined and has completely lost productivity, Jeeter sticks to the

land and would not go to work elsewhere. His life is sinful but he believes that his god would forgive him if he prays. In this way, the Lesters lead such a desperately poor and degraded life as to be ridiculed even by the blacks whom they despise. Yet, they stick to the vain pride in their white blood no matter how degenerated they are in such a commonplace and immoral life.

Their attitudes toward blacks whom they consider to be far below them will invite our attention here and there: when Dude and Bessie's car hits a carriage and a black is thrown out dead, they pay no attention to his life. When Lov takes Pearl, not Ellie May, for his wife, he says he does not care which one becomes his wife, but only cares if he would be laughed at by the blacks if he took a harelipped wife. Likewise, when Jeeter thinks of future, he worries about Ellie May; he does not want to leave her unmarried after the death of his wife and himself because if they left her alone, he thinks, "the niggers would haul off and come here by the dozens" and they "would get her in no time."³ In the end, he forces Lov to take Ellie May after Pearl runs away and keeps his line from the intermixture of blood.

Another conspicuous poor white figure is Anse Bundren, a poor white, in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) He goes on a burial trip of his wife, Addie, to put her will to practice; she made him promise to take her back to Jefferson, forty miles away from their home, when she dies. Anse's character is well described by Jan Bakker:

Anse Bundren, ... is one of Faulkner's most accomplished villains.... Behind his unbelievable laziness, his crass egoism and despicable stinginess, there hides a predatoriness, which is made even more lethal by his consummate hypocrisy and his relentless knowledge of how far he can go in taking advantage of other people's goodness. Jewel's love of his horse, for which he has worked so back-breakingly hard that it has made his mother cry; Dewey Dell's desperate pleading to let her keep the ten dollars for the abortion drugs, mean nothing to him if they interfere with his own plans. During Addie's illness his stinginess makes him wait till the last moment before calling the doctor, and Cash's sufferings after he has broken his leg leave him completely indifferent. Yet, though he seems

contemptible in practically everything he says and does, he is a man who cannot be ignored. He represents, ... "a force probably necessary to the survival of the human animal though it is terrifying when seen in such purity."⁴

The burial trip is accompanied by Anse and Addie's five children, each of who has his/her own reason to go on the trip, far from sending their mother to heaven with their deep affection toward her. On their way, they display stupidity on occasions like turning over the waggon holding her coffin on the top into the current, setting Cash's broken leg in a cast by pouring sand and cement around it, the daughter going into drugstores for abortion drugs, and the father taking away his own daughter's money to get his own teeth and have a new wife to replace Addie at the end of the journey. Still, they retain a code of family honor; when the waggon, with its stinking corpse, meets with three negroes, one of who expresses his sense of outrage at the evil smell, they can't allow the negroes to insult their mother.

Social circumstances surrounding these poor whites are well described in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). House slaves on large plantations bluntly insult and despise the poor whites who can only own a few or no slaves, and would take pride in their social superiority. An instance of such a poor white is characterized by Tom Slattery:

The sight of Tom Slattery dawdling on his neighbours' porches, begging cotton seed for planting or a side of bacon to 'tide him over', was a familiar one. Slattery hated his neighbours with what little energy he possessed, sensing their contempt beneath their courtesy, and especially did he hate 'rich folks' uppity niggers'. The house negroes of the County considered themselves superior to white trash, and their unconcealed scorn stung him, while their more secure position in life stirred his envy. By contrast with his own miserable existence, they were well-fed, well-clothed and looked after in sickness and old age. They were proud to belong to people who were quality, while he was despised by all.⁵

In this way, we can understand that as a common characteristic, the

poor whites hold psychological pressure to keep their dignity as the white race and such pressure stimulates the conflict within themselves.

II. Poor White's Dignity Lost in His Sputpid Struggle

Although poor white characters like Jeeter Lester and Anse Bundren are submerged in the stupid and degraded lives of the poor white, they never struggle to run off from them. Rather, they seem to accept 'life' as it is, and eventually, they succeed in retaining their white dignity or family honor by at least leaving sons and daughters of purely white lineage. In the meantime, tragedy seems to occur when the desperate struggle of poor whites to extricate themselves from the doomed life is put into practice.

The direct victims in southern literature are often blacks or part blacks, but the essence of the conflict does not lie in the relationships between the blacks and the poor whites, but it lies in the mind of the poor whites themselves. They are struggling against the people of their own race who made the social order as it is, and when they try to emerge and free themselves from their predicaments, they often endeavor themselves so desperately, which seems to cause them to create trigger of tragedies.

In the white society of the South, success was only brought to those who had religious faith, owned land and maintained their lineage; poor whites have been seeking these for their uprising or at least to maintain their status as whites. Doc Hines and Joe Brown (Lucus Burch) in *Light in August* and Thomas Sutpen and Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* are such figures who play the role of the trigger-of-tragedies. The abortive insistance of those poor whites on the dignity of white blood eventually causes such fatal results as the death of Joe Christmas and the catastrophic downfall of the Sutpen's Hundred.

Lucus Burch who fathered Lena Grove's child has left her and comes to Jefferson changing his name to Joe Brown. He lives in a cabin with Joe Christmas, a bootlegger. They get along well until Joe tells Brown that he has negro blood: the moment Brown knows this, their relationship is reversed in Brown's mind; to him, Joe, his boss, is transferred to be clearly an inferior being and he begins to feel discontent with the way

Joe has treated him. Therefore, when the news of a thousand dollar's reward for the capture of Joanna Burden's murderer spreads, Brown instantly comes to the sheriff for the money. He announces that Joe has negro blood, which offends the whole town; a negro killing a white woman shall not be forgiven. In this way, prodigal poor white, Brown makes a direct cause for Joe's capture and castration. Joe is made a tragic hero also because of his grandfather, Doc Hines, a freak, a fanatic, a vile type of segregationist, who doubts that Joe's father might have had some black blood, and who cannot allow a drop of black blood in his heir. He not only shoots Joe's father but also lets his own daughter die before his own eye. He keeps telling Joe and people around him subtly that Joe has been negro ever since his innocent childhood and runs after him until he commits a murder. It is he who most strongly persists on lynching Joe and his immediate death. In this way, Joe is victimized both physically and mentally by these poor whites, to be more precise, by their entirely personal inner struggle.

Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* is also a poor figure who has clung to the white blood. When he is turned down by a well-dressed negro, he realizes that there is the other side of white life. As an innocent hillbilly boy of only thirteen or fourteen from the mountains, he came down to the Tidewater with his family. He encounters the stern reality of the world when he was sent by his father to a plantation house with a message, only to be told to go around to the back by a nigger slave. Here, quite discontented with the way he is treated, young Sutpen learns there is "the difference not only between white men and black ones", but that there is "a difference between white men and white men,"⁶ and he determines to make himself stand on "the proper side of the bar of difference"⁷. By this incident, young Sutpen learns that his shame is not due to the black who simply turned him down in place of his master, but the unseen bar of difference between the slave owners and his own people, and that he wants to be white of their kind. Thus, with the 'design' as his pabulum, he goes off to Haiti to make his fortune on a sugar plantation, and there he takes a wife whom he believes to be white but who turns out to be part negro, "a fact that, as he puts it, makes an 'ironic delusion' of his entire design, which depends upon genealogical clarity and purity, on the ability to chart a clear authoritative relationship between origin and endpoint"⁸. So he repudiates his wife and starts over

again at Sutpen's Hundred. After a series of disasters, his 'design' still goes on persistent; he proposes Rosa that they marry if she bears a son, and after Rosa goes back to Jefferson in her outrage, he makes his last attempt with Milly Jones - the granddaughter of Wash Jones, the servile poor white, - which, however, results in his death by the hand of the servant.

Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* is a typical poor white and he plays a particularly symbolic role with the downfall of the Sutpens. The place and date of his birth unknown, he lives in a shabby cabin in the Sutpen's Hundred with his daughter and granddaughter. He is submissive to Sutpen and is deprived of even the right to approach the front door just as Sutpen was when he was a boy. While Sutpen is fighting away in the Civil War, the thrall'd servant brings fish and food to his master's remaining wife and daughters, Judith and Clytie. Clytie, a half negro, would not let him in the house even when he brings food they live on. But this poor white approaches and drives into the house in proportion to the downfall of the Sutpens. He considers himself as a white like Sutpen and dreams of getting out of his thrall'dom just like him. His dream-come-true event takes place when his granddaughter gets pregnant by Sutpen. He says to himself:

Wash Jones has fixed old Sutpen at last. It taken him twenty years to do it, but he has got a holt of old Sutpen at last where Sutpen will either have to tear meat or squeal.... And how could I have lived nigh to him for twenty years without being touched and changed by him? Maybe I am not as big as he is and maybe I did not do any of the galloping. But at least I was drug along where he went. And me and him can still do hit and will ever so, if so be he will show me what he aims for me to do....⁹

His dream is broken, however, at the very moment a baby-girl is born. When Sutpen simply says to the girl that it was too bad and leaves her, Jones is outraged both by the shame on his granddaughter and by his failure to obtain lineage with the Sutpens; he takes a rusty scythe and immediately kills Sutpen with it. Wash Jones is significant not only as a murderer of Sutpen, but as a symbolic character to trigger the downfall of

the Sutpens, for his approach to the Sutpen's house goes hand in hand with its downfall:

Jones who before '61 had not been even allowed to approach the front of the house and who during the next four years got no nearer than the kitchen door and that only when he brought the game and fish and vegetables on which the seducer-to-be's wife and daughter (and Clytie too, the one remaining servant, Negro, the one who would forbid him to pass the kitchen door with what he brought) depended on to keep life in them, but who now entered the house itself on the (quite frequent now) afternoons when the demon would suddenly curse the store empty of customers.... Jones...catching him as he fell and commandeering the first passing wagon to take him to the house and carry him up the front steps and through the paintless formal door... and on up the stairs and into the bedroom and put him to bed like a baby and then lie down himself on the floor beside the bed....¹⁰

By the crucial time, 1866, Sutpen has lost all his hope of achieving his design to place himself on "the other side of the bar", and what little insistence he clings to is the protection of his pride of white lineage. However, having been turned down his proposal by Rosa, and given a baby-girl by Milly, his whole 'design' vanishes with his own energy. The very cause of this is originated from the poor white boy's determination, or his 'design', to extricate himself from the poor white class; in order to achieve his desire, he had to hold fast to his dream of a noble white Sutpen lineage.

III. Conclusion

The sense of superiority over the blacks defends the last fortress for the poor whites. Black people in the American society are very often made scapegoats for the poor whites, but any cruel treaty as of lynching or killing them will never solve the crucial problems in American society; what they are doing is simply "retreat(s) into the sanctity of race, and to the safety of racial epithets."¹¹ Indeed, Doc Hines and Joe Brown in

Light in August believe in white supremacy and act to the effect that they sway the fate of Joe Christmas and lead public opinion to his murder. What is especially unique with the poor whites, namely, Thomas Sutpen and Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the fact that unlike Doc Hines and Joe Brown, they are evidently conscious of "the bar of difference" within the whites and make desperate efforts to approach the other side of the bar, only to bring disasters to themselves. In this way, what *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* differ from other works mentioned earlier is that they treat the conflicts and struggles of the poor whites in the world where both blacks and whites and their intermixtures reside. They not only deal with the natural conflict between blacks and whites, including mulattoes, but also involve psychological conflict within the world of the whites. The given and never escapable role of the poor whites in these two works, as has been discussed so far, is the crucial player of the tragedy as its trigger.

The important subject left for the author's future study could be to discuss why and how most of the writers of the Southern Renaissance, those important writers mentioned above among them, have come to grapple with their works in which poor whites play a most important role in the fictive or thematic time, as in the period of the Civil War days or the Depression days.

Notes

¹ Charles Reagan Wilson & William Ferris, coed., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 1138-9.

² Article 1 of the United States Constitution (1787), in setting taxes, declares that the number of blacks are counted as worthy of three-fifths of whites. By the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 by President Lincoln, slaves were freed and Civil Right Amendments 13, 14, and 15 were passed in 1865, 1868, and 1870 respectively, declaring the end of the slavery, that all persons born or naturalized in the United States are citizens of the United States, and that all citizens are given the right to vote.

³ Erskin Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (NY: Signet Classic, 1962), p. 158.

- ⁴ Jan Bakker, "As I Lay Dying Reconsidered" in *William Faulkner* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 228.
- ⁵ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 52-53.
- ⁶ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987), pp. 185-186.
- ⁷ Peter Brooks, "Incredulous Narration; *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *William Faulkner*, p. 259.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- ⁹ Faulkner, *op. cit.*, pp. 236, 237.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- ¹¹ Thadious M. Davis, *Faulkner's "Negro"* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 210.