

# Juxtaposition and Revelations in Faulkner's *Sanctuary*

by Deborah Quick

In William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, there is no sanctuary for any of the characters. The title of this novel is as opposite to the outcome as the juxtaposition of most elements within the novel creating a chasm in which the plot unfolds. It is within this chasm, sometimes a crevice but mostly a chasm, that the reader peers into an abyss only to be shocked by the violence, brutality, and treachery at every turn. In all of Faulkner's novels, Yoknapatawpha County serves as the backdrop for racial, social, and economic conflicts of the people who inhabit this fictional Southern location. His novels explore the lives of those inhabitants while revealing themes inherent to the Southern myth and its impact on Southerners. Faulkner uses nature and the landscape as a backdrop for most of his novels, and in *Sanctuary* "the wilderness itself and all its lessons in humility and patience and courage could avail nothing in the face of the shame of slavery and its irrational hold upon the true lovers of the South" (Meyer 34). The violence and brutality in *Sanctuary* set it apart from Faulkner's other great works such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Unlike these novels, *Sanctuary* is not about family; it encompasses a broader topic: community and society.

The changing landscape of the South after the Civil War and the situation of Native Americans, Blacks, and poor and wealthy whites provide the narratives for Faulkner's gothic tales in Yoknapatawpha County. Through Faulkner's modernist structure and language, he creates a "gothic sense of uncertainty and alienation" capturing the reader searching for closure (Bjerre). Faulkner provides a window into the past and present with his novels, and *Sanctuary* holds a mirror to the Southern people daring them to look into it. Through violent imagery,

Faulkner pierces the Southern myth in a way that horrifies readers. *Sanctuary* is Faulkner's vehicle for exposing Southern traditions, corruption, and socioeconomic disparities as his characters crash into chaos leading to misery for everyone involved. However, readers and critics alike should be aware of the circumstances of "the South from 1865 to about 1918 or the early nineteen-twenties, [...] neither Faulkner nor any other Southern writer had a fully developed, self-conscious historical sense" (Tate 419).

In Faulkner's work, there is a pattern of exposing the South's flaws. Unlike some of his other novels, Faulkner's *Sanctuary* does not just evoke terror from the reader but horror as well with the violent rape of Temple Drake. There is a continual presence of tension and contrast created through many characters, situations, and details. The juxtaposition of light and dark, good and evil, the haves and have nots, etc. are apparent throughout the novel. Each of these instances is rooted in Faulkner's design of exposing the South's past and the changes taking place transforming the lives and institutions in the south. The glaring juxtaposition of so many elements in the novel creates a chasm that exposes the death of Southern tradition and the difficulty Southerners have of embracing a new dialogue and a new way of life during the early 1900's. In *Sanctuary*, William Faulkner uses juxtaposition with characters, places, and events to create tension and contrast which emphasizes the South's evaporating traditions and illuminates the impending industrialization in this Southern gothic novel.

Juxtaposition is woven throughout the novel "setting up pairs of permanently contrasted characters [in a] series of shifting and temporary oppositions" (C. Brown 81) to parallel the rise and downfall of Popeye and Temple Drake. Temple is a symbol of Southern tradition and Popeye the symbol for industrialization. Their lives violently intersect, much like the Civil War, with the outcome of the Southern way of life slowly evaporating and, in its place a more

industrialized South without slavery but with a racist mentality, and a society desperately clinging to their traditional way of life and the ideals that permeate it. In this juxtaposed abyss, “we have the transformation of natural love itself into old Civil War vendettas wherein sexual seduction and conquest become the miniature replay of "battles" between Southerner and Yankee—...” (Meyer 42). Popeye’s rape of Temple might be viewed as a symbol for the Civil War and the aftermath compared to the Reconstruction of the South. The corncob itself is a symbol for the Southern agricultural way of life. When Popeye uses this as a phallus to rape Temple, it is symbolic of industrialization raping the South of its agricultural traditions and eliminating their means to maintain the status quo with the abolition of slavery. Even when the corncob is presented in court, the dark dried blood symbolizes the bloodshed of so many slaves and the South during the Civil War. When Temple accuses Lee Goodwin of being the man that raped her with the corncob, Lee Goodwin is sacrificed like so many Black slaves, and his ultimate torturous death being burned alive and lynched symbolizes the horrific torture and lynching of so many innocent Black lives. Temple represents the white people who callously blame Blacks for many impunities for which they are not at fault. Faulkner’s technique in *Sanctuary* “[sets] up characters who have little in common, and [brings] them together at close quarters and [lets] them at each other’s throats” (C. Brown 83).

Faulkner follows gothic tradition with the juxtaposition of Popeye and Temple. She is the woman in distress being pursued in a dark ominous environment, the Old Frenchman’s Place, with Temple running around from place to place trying to hide. While the terror of different scenarios playing over in Temple’s mind causes her distress, it reaches a crescendo with the horrific rape by Popeye. The tyrannical male and the metonymy of the corncob as a phallus intensify the anger and evil of Popeye. For Faulkner it seems “evil involves the violation of the

natural and the denial of the human” (Brooks 699). Just as southerners were to blame for the enslavement of Blacks, Temple is somewhat to blame for the situation in which she finds herself at the bootlegger’s house. Temple leaves the Old Frenchman’s Place and runs away from the house, but then chooses to go back for the night. No one physically incarcerates her there. Temple is both disgusted and tantalized by the men there, and although she is used to tempting men and toying with them, Popeye is not a man with whom she can just flirt. Her attempts at drawing attention to herself by darting in and out of entrances at the bootlegger’s place infer “Temple wants in part to be caught; and the flight of the heroine was wholly a flight of escape, while Temple's running is like an animalistic, feintingly evasive mating dance” (Frazier 117.) Just as the North and South were oppositional in the Civil War, Popeye and Temple are juxtaposed leading to their eventual encounter in which Popeye violently overtakes Temple. While playing the innocent damsel in distress, “she is a member of a good family, the daughter of a judge, but [...] she is one of the most corrupt characters in all of Faulkner” (W. Brown 443-444). Faulkner, like other Southern gothic writers of his time, followed the Gothic tradition in fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which [...] [was] concerned with the psychological adjustments of the new middle class to an industrial capitalist society” (Heller 255).

As a modernist, Faulkner often creates a random mix and order of characters’ streams of consciousness in many of his most distinguished novels such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* However, with *Sanctuary*, other than a flashback chapter at the end, which attempts to provide a backstory for Popeye, Faulkner maintains a chronological sequence of events which allows the juxtaposition of many novel elements to rise to the surface and float on top, visible to the reader, rather than submerging them in a subtle way. By

juxtaposing characters “into a constantly shifting series of pairings, [...] the basic structure of the novel can best be described as a series of confrontations. The opening one between Popeye and Horace sets the tone” (C. Brown 81).

The two significant male characters, Horace Benbow and Popeye, are juxtaposed to create a crevice of space rather than a chasm concerning desire, motivation, and morality. These two characters seemingly represent good and evil; however, they have many similar traits. The novel begins with the juxtaposition of Horace Benbow and Popeye with the spring separating them. The tension is as palpable as the water they drink. They have taken different paths, but each is impotent in his own way. Benbow’s inability as a man to face conflict and speak up for himself to the women in his life leaves him living an unfulfilled life. His obsession with his step-daughter, Little Bell, as well as the implied incestuous desire for his sister, Narcissa, leaves him morally bankrupt and empty. From this and other instances in his writing, it becomes apparent “Faulkner’s view of woman, then, is radically old-fashioned— even medieval. Woman is the source and sustainer of virtue and also a prime source of evil” (Brooks 697). Horace’s impotence extends to his professional life too. As an attorney, he fails to keep an innocent man, Lee Goodwin, from being convicted of murder. He seems ignorant to the forces against him in this case and appears to basically give up, and instead just go through the mechanical motions of court procedure. His mechanical performance in court juxtaposes the description of Popeye being mechanical throughout the novel. It seems at this point, Horace, like Popeye, doesn’t care if Lee Goodwin is convicted.

Both Benbow and Popeye desire a female they cannot have. Benbow develops an attraction to his step-daughter, Little Bell, and Popeye wants a young woman who is far above him, Temple, who, according to societal mores, is out of reach. While Benbow never acts on his

lust because of societal taboos and the etiquette of the South, Popeye not only acts on his lustful desire, he violently takes what he wants, Temple, and inflicts physical and emotional torment from which Temple will never recover. This parallels the South's past and current situation. Horace represents the South's past traditions in which respectable men do not break the strong societal norms that permeate the fabric of the south, even though their lust is strong, and if they do, no one knows about it. While visiting Temple at Miss Reba's brothel, "Horace Benbow examines a photograph of his stepdaughter, and his senses fuse syn aesthetically as the images of Little Belle and Temple Drake blend into one nauseating horror" (Marshall 393-394). At that moment, Horace realizes his own moral depravity, his own lustful desires that lurk in the repressed depths of his tainted soul. He is not much different than Popeye in his desires. Horace "knew what the sensation in his stomach meant ... he gave over and plunged forward and struck the lavatory and leaned upon his braced arms while the shucks set up a terrific uproar beneath her thighs" (Faulkner 215-216). Horace is visiting Temple to find out information that will help convict Popeye and bring him to justice for Tommy's murder. However, his need to defend Lee Goodwin and see Popeye punished resonates with Horace on a different level as well. "His desire to bring Popeye to justice is justified by the literal truth of Popeye's guilt, but it is also necessary to Horace's concept of himself" because Horace feels the need to be legitimized as a trial attorney and feels the need to inflict punishment for his own sordid desires (Heller 254).

Faulkner creates flawed characters and highlights the Southern Christian values that repress individuals' subconscious impulses as "Faulkner's men cannot be content merely with being natural. They must confront the fact of evil. They are constrained to moral choices. They achieve goodness by discipline and effort" (Brooks 698). Faulkner's background with Calvinism and Southern Christian values are found in all of his works whether blatantly addressed or as a

subtle subconscious reference. He makes clear that oftentimes the Christian beliefs and Christian verbiage do not always translate into Christian actions and *Sanctuary* is no exception, particularly with the Baptist women and Ruby. Faulkner's works often contain "the basic premise of Original Sin; everywhere the conflict between the flesh and the spirit. Man in Faulkner is a heroic, tragic figure" (Brooks 692).

Popeye represents the future of industry in which men take whatever they want to gain power, status, and satisfy themselves regardless of what is considered acceptable, and no matter who it hurts or what consequences arise. The imagery used by Faulkner to infer symbolism with Popeye's eyes reflect "two knobs of soft black rubber. Face had a queer, bloodless color, as though seen by electric light; against the sunny silence, in his planted straw hat and his slightly akimbo arms, he had that vicious depthless quality of stamped tin" (Faulkner 1). This description mirrors machination and the advancing industry impeding the South's ability to maintain its traditional status quo. Many critics have commented and analyzed the nonhuman qualities of Popeye throughout the novel. Faulkner's use of metallic imagery has been interpreted by Robert Penn Warren as a symbol of the dehumanized society of 'finance capitalism'" (W. Brown 430). However, it's not just Popeye's metallic presence that alludes to the erosion of the traditional South, it's also his inability to be at one with nature. To Faulkner, anything or anyone who was at odds with nature represented evil. "Juxtaposed as it is to the phrase 'against the sunny silence,' it stresses the sense of the contrived, the artificial, as though Popeye constituted a kind of monstrous affront to the natural scene. Popeye [is] a kind of allegorical figure, a representation of the inhumanly mechanistic forces of our society" (Brooks 698).

It's not just characters that Faulkner juxtaposes in *Sanctuary*. The various settings provide contrast and tension revealing that it is not just people who must adapt in the South, but

the constructs that confine the characters are changing too. Faulkner utilizes the South and “the plantation complex [...] to develop the sacrificial crisis. The dilapidated architecture serves as a reminder that institutions and the social relations that constitute them do not die, but continue to structure the present” (Corrigan 153).

Nature is inherent to the settings within the narrative. In the opening scene, Benbow and Popeye are simply two men on separate journeys stopping at a pond. They are from different social worlds, but at that moment, they share nature’s space, solitude, and bounty. That quickly changes as “Popeye deliberately spits into the spring, he cringes in terror from the low swooping owl, he is afraid of the dark” (Brooks 698). Nature is a key element in most of Faulkner’s novels. Nature represents all that is good and right in the world while “the worst villains in Faulkner are cut off from nature. They have in some profound way denied their nature...” (Brooks 697).

However, as they travel down their own paths, both are engulfed by the same society in which they live. Horace as a prominent attorney defending people’s lives, and Popeye as a social outcast and bootlegger taking lives and leaving rippling destruction in his wake. The stark contrast of their two professions uncovers the traditional positions of the Southern litigator, who comes from generational wealth, and the, albeit illegal, entrepreneurial spirit of the poor younger generations eager to have as much money as the established families and are determined to acquire that wealth by any means necessary. In *Sanctuary*, as Popeye and Horace seem to have only coincidentally crossed paths, “Faulkner presents a mirror structure, the underworld of bootlegging and prostitution mirroring the respectable world of law and order” (Heller, 247). The juxtaposition of their journeys through society illuminates the difference of past traditions with Horace living within strict societal confines, being responsible, caring about people, and repressing his desires, even if it means an unfulfilling life. This is opposed to living the life



Popeye maintains, obtaining the things he wants, and taking what he wants with no regard for others, even if it means dying young.

Throughout *Sanctuary*, there is good, and there is evil. People, places, and events that are good appear to reflect Southern tradition, while all evil is represented as black. Faulkner chooses for Popeye to be a white character. Had Faulkner made Popeye a Black man, there probably would have been public outrage and backlash. However, in all descriptions of Popeye he is deemed a black character. The constant use of black with connection to evil reflects the Southerners' view of Black Americans in the South. Faulkner uses "black" in two ways. First, as a subtle reference to the feelings of Southerners toward Black Americans. More overtly; however, is his use of "black" to indicate the changes pervading the South socially, economically, and politically. Further, he juxtaposes many instances of not only good and evil, but black and white and light and dark. In all instances, evil, black, and dark, are greatly contrasted with good, white, and light to reverberate the Old South with the New South.

Throughout the narrative, Popeye is constantly smoking. Every time Popeye comes into a scene, he has a cigarette hanging from his mouth. It is not just the cigarette that is constant but Faulkner's description of the smoke that fills the spaces in which Popeye enters. Popeye's cigarette smoke symbolizes the pollution that is Popeye. Alluding to the pollution emitted by Popeye everywhere he goes and with every person he encounters, "Faulkner intensifies this transgression of the civic arena by showing how Popeye's physical transgressions culminate in the pollution of all interior spaces" (Corrigan 144-145). This is juxtaposed to Horace Benbow who smokes a pipe, but not just a pipe, a corncob pipe. Horace's corncob pipe represents traditional Southern gentleman while Popeye's cigarettes symbolize the cutthroat financial institutions invading the South. However, Horace's corncob pipe is also symbolic of the phallus

used by Popeye to rape Temple because Horace has sexual fantasies about his step-daughter, Little Bell.

Good and evil continue to be juxtaposed throughout Sanctuary in other ways too. When Ruby needs a place to stay in town while waiting for Lee's trial, it's the so-called Christian women who take no pity on her and want her gone. It's the women in town, "the Baptists [who] seem to have persecuted Ruby more as a loose confederation of kindred spirits than as an actual organization, but the idea of a confrontation between their principles and their practice is inherent in the situation" (C. Brown 86). When Horace has the notion to allow Ruby to stay at his home, Narcissa puts an immediate stop to that idea. Horace's repulsion at the Baptist women and his sister's position on the issue is obvious and "emphasized in Horace's sarcastic 'Christians. Christians'" (C. Brown 217). Once again, Narcissa prevails, demonstrating she dictates Horace's life, and he allows it.

Narcissa's meddling in Horace's affairs goes further, and the juxtaposition of Narcissa and her wishes for Horace surpass Horace's goals for himself. Horace wants to free Lee Goodwin from prison and prove at trial he is innocent of the rape of Temple Drake. It's possible he might have been able to see justice; however, unbeknownst to Horace, Narcissa takes information she receives from the corrupt Senator Snopes and relays the information to the judge in Lee Goodwin's case. The guilty verdict and imminent death of Lee Goodwin does not bother Narcissa. It is more important to her that her brother not work on such a horrible case for fear of embarrassment or ugly rumors about her or Horace in society. Narcissa and Temple together cause the death of the innocent Lee Goodwin. Neither of them shows remorse for contributing to the death of an innocent man as long as what they did serves their own personal aspirations.

These two women are the epitome of those who look like good people on the outside but are evil on the inside.

When the funeral for Red takes place, the juxtaposition of the traditional Southern mourners and the fast track underworld mourners stand in stark contrast. The juxtaposition of these two worlds creates dark humor during this somber gathering. At the funeral, “the juxtaposition of the conventional Gothic stimulus element, the *black pall*, and that characteristically modern, the *crap table*, or more generally the modernistic finishing treatment given that which began taking conventional shape, that gives *Sanctuary* much of its shocking power and ultimately its force of moral censure” (Frazier 114). Nothing about Red’s funeral is typical. Having his or any funeral in a gambling roadhouse is unorthodox. The juxtaposition of the two lifestyles creates tension among the people, in which the two sets of mourners “fight around Red’s coffin and finally overturn it represent[ing] different institutions, different values, different goals. It is a battle of church against roadhouse, stuffy decorum against hectic hedonism, human dignity against human desires” (C. Brown 86).

Within Faulkner’s juxtaposition, he employs symbolism to create tangible ideas. Two of the most obvious symbols are Temple Drake and Popeye Vitelli. Both serve as archetypes that propel the narrative forward while juxtaposed to create extreme tension. Temple is the damsel in distress but also represents the old south. Her name, “Temple” is symbolic of young females who come from traditional wealthy families in the south, virtuous, flirtatious, and untouchable. Juxtaposed in a setting with Popeye, the villain. He represents the marginal society in the south, those who, in order to obtain the American Dream, must become entrepreneurs and often criminals. In the New South, those who were once relegated to a life of less, now seek more by any means necessary. This also parallels the ideology of industry.

*Sanctuary* takes place in the chasm and crevice between the juxtaposed characters, places, and events. It's in this dark abyss that so many lives are destroyed. Just as the Civil War destroyed a way of life for Southerners and their society had to undergo transformation to exist with changing times, Popeye and Temple Drake transform, embracing their true dark nature and the end result of the choices they make. The central characters continue on at the end with their apathetic ways. Horace Benbow goes back to his unfulfilling life with his wife Bell, and "Temple has clearly followed the same path as the other principal characters of *Sanctuary*, from active, self-centered confrontations to indifference and apathy and this is, of course, the pattern to the book itself" (C. Brown 94). Regardless of the commercial hype surrounding *Sanctuary*, it is at its core an examination of the inner self and its relation to society, examining Southern society and traditional values during industrialization. The plot illuminates the "satirical quality of the book [...]in the sharp juxtaposition of incongruous details, in the "macabre paradox," in the fusion of Poe and Capone (Frazier 115). Faulkner's use of juxtaposition throughout this story highlights the chasm between two worlds, one of the past and one of the future, with the uncertain present changing the way of life in the South. The illusion of the Southern Myth becomes apparent as Original Sin, "the blood crime of slavery is too great to stage upon any one body alone; it involves countless murdered bodies sowed into the soil. Like the voice of fury that screams from out of the void in *Sanctuary*, the cry of the old unsleeping blood appears perversely transcendent and peaceful" (Corrigan 153). Faulkner creates two juxtaposed worlds as a representation of his "contemporary, social world" (Heller 255). As a Southern gothic writer, William Faulkner left a legacy for other writers, and provided an education to his readers. "He was a master of authentic observation and of the inner conflict" (Tate 421), and no other

Southern writer has influenced literature in the way Faulkner has, leading to generations and decades of readers finding relevance and meaning in his words well into the 21st century.

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