

ANALYSIS

Intruder in the Dust (1948)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“Lucas Beauchamp, an aging black farmer whose grandparents were the white Carothers McCaslin and a slave woman, is arrested for the murder of Vinson Gowrie, one of a clan of hillmen known for administering their own violent law. Hope Hampton, Yoknapatawpha County sheriff, brings Lucas to the Jefferson jail, where a crowd expects the Gowries to lynch him. Charles (‘Chick’) Mallison, County Attorney Gavin Stevens’s 16-year-old nephew, goes to see Lucas, recalling the old man’s kindness in caring for him some years earlier when he fell into an icy creek. Lucas asks Gavin to defend him but will tell only Charles that an examination of Vinson’s body will prove that his gun was not the murder weapon. Charles persuades Aleck Sander, his black companion, and Eunice Habersham, a 70-year-old spinster, to help him dig up the grave, in which they find Jake Montgomery’s body rather than Vinson’s.

Crawford Gowrie had actually shot his brother Vinson in such a way as to implicate Lucas when Lucas threatened to reveal that he was stealing lumber from Vinson. Crawford then murdered Jake and put him in Vinson’s grave because Jake also knew of Crawford’s crime and had disinterred Vinson for proof of the shooting through ballistic evidence. When Vinson’s body is found Crawford is arrested and commits suicide in jail. Lucas is exonerated and the proud, dignified, and courageous black man, who will accept no white man’s charity, pays Gavin his fee of two dollars, painstakingly counted out in pennies, as the last act in the events have made him ‘now tyrant over the whole county’s white conscience’.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 366

“*Intruder in the Dust* bears comparison with *Bleak House*, with the difference that Dickens’s concern is with a single institution while Faulkner deals with the complex and fundamental involvement of a whole society. The supposed murder of a white man by a Negro, a threat of lynching, and even the bill of rights, which certainly brings the material up to the moment, has all the appearance of being the author’s subject; but actually this is only one aspect of it.

In the first paragraph Faulkner reports sparely, tersely even, an act of violence. At high noon the sheriff has reached the jail with Lucas Beauchamp, although the entire country has known since the night before that Lucas killed a white man.... He is the basic symbol of the Southern predicament.... The act of violence has already happened. But the pastness of it is not static. There is a continuum in the information about the spread of the news; and given the particular kind of news it is and the lapse of time between the murder and the jailing of Lucas, we are made to feel a mounting suspense which gives to the delay, as the story unfolds, a quality of mystery. This suspense and a feeling of the dark unknown is further tightened by the emphasis on time, not any hour but the hour of noon, a crucial division of time which we sense will be of importance, if for no more [reason] than that the narrow limits it suggests will contain the action.... Instead of leading up to the murder as the final release to the tensions of involvement, by putting it into the past Faulkner uses the act as the compulsive force to catalyze the disparate fragments of appearance into reality, for the story is not about violence at all. It is about a sixteen-year-old boy’s education in good and evil and his effort to preserve his spiritual integrity.”

Andrew Lytle

“Regeneration for the Man”

The Sewanee Review LVII.1 (Winter 1949)

“*Intruder in the Dust* (1948) presents a more optimistic analysis of the problems of the South than any of Faulkner’s earlier works. The plot, centering around a lynching story, is banal and has often been treated

by lesser authors; the interest of the novel lies in its memorable characterizations and in its implied socio-political ideas.

The action opens as Lucas Beauchamp, an eccentric old Jefferson Negro, is accused of the murder of a white man, Vinson Gowrie. Feeling among the 'white trash' runs high, not only because Lucas is seized near the body with a pistol in his hand, but because he has a long reputation as a 'high-nosed nigger' who has refused to accept the inferiority of his race. A lynching seems certain. The affair causes a vague feeling of guilt in the boy Charley Mallison; years before he fell into a creek and was taken to Lucas' place to dry out, and the Negro's intelligent friendliness on that occasion has remained in his mind ever since.

Charley's uncle, the lawyer Gavin Stevens, agrees to take Lucas' case, but Lucas will tell the attorney nothing. It is to the boy that he confides his innocence; he asserts to Charley that if Vinson's corpse is dug up it will be found not to have been shot with Lucas' pistol. In the middle of the night Charley, his friend Aleck Sander, and the courageous spinster Miss Eunice Habersham go to the cemetery and exhume the body; to their surprise it is not Vinson, but the loafer and petty criminal Jake Montgomery. Meanwhile, as the mob from Vinson's home district, Ward Four, clusters around the jail, Miss Habersham guards the prisoner with the weapon of her feminine dignity, and the sheriff and Stevens go back to dig the corpse up again. This time the grave is empty.

Both corpses are found buried in the river-bed, and Vinson's relatives are persuaded that Lucas could not have committed the crime. The solution to the mystery gradually comes out. Crawford Gowrie, partner of his brother Vinson in a lumber business, has been stealing lumber from the shed at night. Detected by Lucas, he has killed his brother and thrown the evidence toward Lucas in order to silence the Negro. Later he has been forced to kill Montgomery to cover his tracks. Lucas, freed, is used as a decoy to capture Crawford, who commits suicide in jail.

It is the lawyer Gavin Stevens in this novel who serves as the spokesman of Faulkner's own ideas. Stevens' conversations with the sheriff and with his nephew Charley constitute a comprehensive statement on the Negro problem in the South as it stands today. It is the men of good will—Stevens, the sheriff, Charley, the Negro Lucas, and their kind—who must set about fighting lynching and discrimination with courage. But the job must be done by the South itself. Intervention of the North, through 'Yankee' legislation, will turn both the men of good will and the ignorant Snopeses and crackers against the North; they will unite in a fanatic defense of Southern independence, and the Negro's lot will be worse than before. If the South is allowed to handle the problem itself progress will be slow, as all true progress is; the Civil War adequately demonstrated that no mere Constitutional Amendment has the power to free the Negro. The South, led by its young and educated, must progress in its own way; and Faulkner in this novel shows a constructive and optimistic picture of how this may be done."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 219-21

"The abundance of reviews of *Intruder in the Dust* testified both to the 'arrival' of its author as a literary celebrity and to the controversial nature of the work itself. The long direct statements made by Ike McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* had prepared the discerning reviewer somewhat for the 'shock' of Gavin Stevens in this novel. As a consequence of its directness, the novel became the subject of sharply drawn lines of interpretation. Everyone admitted the greater 'explicitness' of Faulkner's text, most reviewers with regret. Edmund Wilson's *New Yorker* review (October 23, 1948) stated most sharply the two objections to the book: those to its too false directness of polemical statement and to its defeating and finally needless involutions of style. Of the latter Wilson said that they are too often 'the casualties of an indolent taste and a negligent workmanship' not seen so abundantly in his earlier prose. As for the 'tract,' the novel contains 'a kind of counterblast to the anti-lynching bill and to the civil rights plank in the Democratic platform.'

One inference drawn from this novel by Faulkner's apologists was stated by Malcolm Cowley (*The New Republic*, October 18, 1948): 'Now one can clearly see what so many readers formerly overlooked: that these are Faulkner's people and that he loves them in a fashion fierce and proprietary.' But the major question (except for critics like Barbara Giles of *Masses and Mainstream*) was not so much Faulkner's

right to 'love' these people, but rather the propriety of Gavin Stevens' 'lectures': had not the 'point' of them been most brilliantly and dramatically made in the first seven chapters, and especially in the very fine narrative of the Lucas-Chick Mallison tensions? Some reviewers (like Harvey Breit, *New York Times*, September 26, 1948) were willing to maintain that Stevens' arguments had been more than satisfactorily 'particularized.' Irving Howe (*American Mercury*, October, 1948) spoke of Faulkner's extreme use of the 'official' Southern rhetoric, but found that use 'significant' and exciting. On aesthetic grounds it may have to be rejected, but the sincerity of its anger is profound and meaningful.

Dan S. Norton (*Virginia Quarterly Review*, Winter, 1949) thought otherwise: Gavin's role is to intervene, to violate the experiential pattern from which Chick Mallison should come to his special realizations. This was the primary objection—to a 'special pleading,' which, whatever its independent virtues, violated the context and caused an imbalance of narrative and recourse to blunt persuasion. In the end, the reviews of *Intruder in the Dust* provided a remarkable cross section of a considerable body of criticism, of an artist firmly established and widely read. The bulk of the reviewing was now addressed to the question which Faulkner answered (or, at least, to which he gave his own answer) in the long speeches and not to the particular experience dramatized on the courthouse square and in the graveyard. The extremes of rejection and acceptance of the novel were seen in the condescending and somewhat wrongheaded review of Elizabeth Hardwick (*Partisan Review*, October, 1948) and the sober and total endorsement of Andrew Lytle (*Sewanee Review*, Winter, 1949)."

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction (1960)
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 21-22

"Something of a new departure in outlook seems to be noticeable in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), for the evident victory of justice and decency over prejudice and mass-psychology is not one of mere chance but the result of the undaunted efforts of the hero of the story. This hero is, significantly enough, not a grownup person but a boy, and as such capable of the incredible effort of standing up against the opinion of a small town and producing the evidence necessary to prevent the lynching of a Negro who is suspected of having killed a white man.

Though the narrative method is no less oblique than in Faulkner's earlier work, the positive implications are so surprisingly strong that even some of the macabre elements [such] as digging up the same grave twice in one night, are touched by flashes of quaint humor. A definitely optimistic note is sounded also in the analysis of the race relationship, which has a truer ring than in almost any other modern novel, and ranges from the subtle description of a white boy's feeling of obligation towards a Negro, to general statements about the South alone being capable and privileged to put the color question right again. It is not easy to find the connecting link between this melioristic conception and Faulkner's earlier ideas of the nature of Man, unless one resorts to the assumption that the bottomless pit may hold purgatory rather than hell."

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American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 91-92

Michael Hollister (2015)