

ANALYSIS

The Wild Palms (1939)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“That was one story—the story of Charlotte Rittenmeyer and Harry Wilbourne, who sacrificed everything for love, and then lost that. I did not know it would be two separate stories until after I had started the book. When I reached the end of what is now the first section of *The Wild Palms*, I realized suddenly that something was missing, it needed emphasis, something to lift it like counterpoint in music. So I wrote on the *Old Man* story until *The Wild Palms* story rose back to pitch. Then I stopped the *Old Man* story at what is now its first section, and took up *The Wild Palms* story until it began to sag. Then I raided it to pitch again with another section of its antithesis, which is the story of a man who got his love and spent the rest of the book fleeing from it, even to the extent of voluntarily going back to jail where he would be safe. They are only two stories by chance, perhaps necessity.”

William Faulkner

Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews
ed. Malcolm Cowley
(Viking/Compass 1959) 133

“William Faulkner’s latest novel, *The Wild Palms*, tells two entirely different stories, in alternating sections; but the stories are complementary in that they both derive from the conflict between humanism and naturalism. For Harry, the young doctor, and Charlotte, his mistress, all humanistic morality is equated with the Snopes code of mere ‘respectability,’ into which morality has degenerated. Of that code, one of the characters says: ‘If Jesus returned today we would have to crucify him quick in our own defense, to justify and preserve the civilization we have worked and suffered and died...for two thousand years to create and perfect in man’s own image.’

Charlotte and Harry are attempting to escape from the code into pure naturalism. Charlotte is natural, or amoral, Woman; with her, Harry becomes natural, amoral Man. They are constantly insisting upon the entirely physical nature of their love—and in no evasive terms. Their fear of any code amounts to an obsession: when they begin to feel as if they were married, living and working together in Chicago, they run off to a remote mining settlement in order to escape respectability. But Harry is conscious of doom: ‘So I am afraid. Because They [the forces of the code] are smart, shrewd, They will have to be; if They were to let us beat Them, it would be like unchecked murder and robbery. Of course we can’t beat Them; we are doomed, of course...’ The fear is justified, for they are defeated by the very naturalism to which they have fled: Charlotte dies from the effects of an abortion that Harry attempts to perform on her.

The other story concerns a nameless convict, adrift in a small boat on the Mississippi River during the flood of 1927. Like Harry and Charlotte, the convict exists in a realm of unchecked natural forces; but unlike them, he has been put there against his will. With him in the skiff is a pregnant woman whom he has been sent to rescue. Like Anse Bundren, the convict is capable of genuine moral action; and his struggle with naturalism is based upon the ethical urge to return to his prison and to carry back the woman he has saved. When he is finally captured, he says: ‘Yonder’s your boat and here’s the woman’; with simple-minded tenacity, he has fulfilled his ethical obligation.

Technically, the book fails; only the complementary themes connect the two parts, and the connection is not strong enough for any sort of fictional unity. Indeed, it is a pity that the two parts are printed together; for the story of Charlotte and Harry is one of Mr. Faulkner’s failures, whereas the story of the convict is one of his successes. Charlotte and Harry, fleeing the Snopes world but fleeing all codes, too, are products of the anti-traditional overbalancing in Mr. Faulkner which yielded *Pylon*. And the failure of their story derives, like the failure of that book, from the fact that in them the natural protagonist-antagonist schematism of Mr. Faulkner’s myth is reversed. Sympathy must be given to them reluctantly, for though

they are, as a matter of fact, running away from the Snopes world, they are running away from the Sartoris world, too; and, as Harry says, if they were to succeed, it would be like unchecked robbery and murder. In defense of one's own humanism, one must not yield entire sympathy to human beings who enter the realm of pure animalism.

But the story of the nameless convict is an heroic legend, similar to *As I Lay Dying*; it must be counted as one of Mr. Faulkner's definite achievements. Moreover, it has a quality of gusty humor (a sense of the outrageously grotesque heroic, related to the humor of the 'tall tales' in folk literature) which is rarer in Mr. Faulkner's work but which is always impressive when it appears...for example...in the scenes of the convict's alligator hunting in *The Wild Palms*. However, this quality does not destroy, but serves rather to strengthen, the heroic legend as a whole."

George Marion O'Donnell
"Faulkner's Mythology"
The Kenyon Review I.3 (1939)

"The total meaning of the book is derived from a recognition of the three possible ways in which the stories are related. Regarded as parallel, each is concerned with the relationship between the individual, society, and nature, and between freedom and order. In both, the same pattern of confinement, flight, and capture is developed though in different contexts. Juxtaposed, the two narratives obviously modify and influence the reader's interpretation of either one. A too facile admiration of the noble savage in the 'Old Man' is prevented by a recognition of the greater sensitivity and potentialities of the lovers in 'Wild Palms,' with the result that the literary shibboleths of primitivism and Romanticism are both placed in a truer perspective. And finally, taken together, the two stories transcend the peculiarities of a specific time and place as described in each and depict that cyclic movement of culture which Faulkner has explored from various points of view in all his major works. The emphasis is shifted from the individual and his personal history to man and history in general....

As his freedom becomes more and more restricted, the individual's only hope for preserving his distinctive humanity is to escape from or challenge those patterns which have become moribund.... The flood destroys all familiar landmarks just as Harry's and Charlotte's passion sweeps away the customs and conventions of the established social order. Society, however, relentlessly reasserts itself and its own power by rebuilding the dams and levees, returning the convict to prison, and punishing Harry for his defiance of law and morality. Its triumph over the individual is, nevertheless, only temporary since change and the gesture of protest are as much a part of the record of history as tradition and conformity.... The lovers and the convict...both have a vision of the ideal relationship between the individual, society, and nature. So perfect a balance is, however, necessarily a dream, for it is continually being disrupted by the dominance of one of its elements....

The two stories are...part of one never-ending cycle. The order for which the convict yearns in the midst of the flood becomes the oppressive routine from which the lovers try to escape. Their journeys, linked to a specific time and place, are matched by the greater odyssey of the human race which gradually emerges out of chaos into order and then into regimentation only to find chaos come again. The flood is therefore a twofold symbol. In its unchecked fury, it is the Biblical flood of punishment and purification. Relentlessly it obliterates all those purely human achievements which are embodied in the tamed land. The cities and towns, the neatly fenced farms and houses disappear beneath the flood and the sheets of never ending rain. The stability of place and time, of people and their routines, is abrogated and the rational or at least predictable order of society gives way to the irrational forces of Nature. The flood, however, not only destroys, it also projects us back into the creative genesis of man....

Clinging to that land, a man, a woman, and a new born child form a group which is not so much a family as a biological unit. Both adults are instinctive, intuitive creatures who suggest an almost pre-conscious state of existence....The next stage in man's development is represented by the Cajun settlement, a primitive form of society which provides a precarious and merely temporary equilibrium between the individual, the community, and Nature.... Significantly, he does not use a rifle to kill the crocodiles. The skins he hands over to the Cajun, knowing that he will eventually receive half the profit though there has been no formal agreement, written or even verbal. Individual integrity and mutual trust are the basis of

human association in the Cajun settlement. Gradually, however, a more sophisticated society emerges to destroy its predecessor, scattering the Cajuns and blowing up their home. As the convict discovers, the wilderness must give way to the city and the lone hunter of crocodiles to 'social' man.... In the process of becoming civilized, man repudiates his own roots in Nature. Eagerly he separates himself as far as possible from the animal, deliberately atrophying his natural senses, denying instinct and intuition, and relying solely on his reason....

But though society is man's highest achievement and the source of his richest values, it is also a Frankenstein monster which can and does enslave its creator. As its power increases, man's emotions are channeled into the institutions of marriage and the family, his religious impulses into the church or radio sermon, and his social and moral instincts into unquestioning conformity.... This slow emergence of society is reflected in the convict himself and in his attitude toward language.... Language becomes the foundation of society and of literature, while the convict takes on certain aspects of the civilized man. As he tells his story, there are continual references to the change in his appearance. Through his clean clothes, fresh haircut and shave, and through his new command of language he takes his place in society and separates himself from the man on the river whose story he is telling....

The convict has an instinctive ability to adapt himself to new conditions, and this is due, at least in part, to his total lack of self-consciousness and imagination.... At every moment Harry is fighting not only circumstances but himself and his own imagination. It is this introspective quality that makes Harry's story a tragedy, while the convict's is essentially a comedy... The latter simply adapts himself to each new situation as it arises, whether it be the flood, the Cajuns, the pregnant woman, or the prison.... Charlotte and Harry...pause only long enough to gain strength for a new departure. The convict husbands his strength by travelling with the current: they squander theirs by a never ending conflict with their environment.... They find that each new place merely repeats the one they have left. The isolated mining camp in Utah is only another version of Chicago.... In their revulsion at society's restrictions and dictatorial power, the lovers also reject some of its enduring values....

By her refusal to bear a child, Charlotte makes one supreme effort to circumvent nature and her own biological function. Her insistence that Harry perform an abortion is her last desperate defiance of natural as well as social law.... Ironically...the lovers are not destroyed by either of the forces they feared; it is the love for the sake of which they risked life itself that makes Harry a bungler. And with Charlotte's death and Harry's imprisonment Nature and society signal their inevitable victory over the aspirations of the individual. For by choosing to isolate love, Charlotte and Harry destroyed the balance between man, society, and Nature.... Harry and Charlotte are conscious of being confined within the circle of human life. They have only a limited number of years before death plunges them into oblivion. The structure of their section of the novel repeats this circle, for it both begins and ends in the small Mississippi town and also follows their departure from and return to New Orleans. Similarly, in 'Old Man,' Parchman prison is both the narrative and geographical beginning and end for the convict."

Olga W. Vickery

The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation

(Louisiana State 1959, 1964) 156-65

"A study in middle-class romanticism, 'Wild Palms' is probably the most depressing and painful narrative Faulkner has ever written, if only because the self-destruction of its characters proceeds from a desire in itself admirable. The story opens at the point where the disintegration of its leading figures is almost complete. Charlotte Rittenmeyer, a young woman of powerful ego and compulsive sexuality, and Harry Wilbourne, a rather pliant hospital intern, leave New Orleans after a brief, intense love affair. Charlotte abandons a conventional marriage, Harry the promise of a conventional career. Together they seek a life beyond the city, uncertain whether their rebellion is against bourgeois norms or the very fact of society itself. This confusion of purpose is to be a major source of their troubles, for only if controlled by a precise awareness of both goal and limits could their flight possibly succeed.

Soon their behavior seems a painful demonstration of how perilous the Romantic view of life can be, how violently it can exhaust and then consume those who are not most loyal to it—Romantic in this instance signifying a refusal to live by any terms except those which cannot be enforced. As Charlotte tells

Harry: 'Listen; it's got to be all honeymoon, always....' Charlotte is not a fool; if she were, 'Wild Palms' could not build up to the tension it does. She can be so fanatically self-destructive as to demand 'all honeymoon, always,' but she can also express her outlook in terms that are more impressive: 'They say love dies, between two people. That's wrong. It doesn't die. It just leaves you, goes away, if you are not good enough, worthy enough. It doesn't die; you're the one that dies.'

The two young people believe they are turning to a blazing sensuous life, an utter purity of instinct and touch. Their relationship is eagerly, programmatically physical; only the clash of bodies, they feel, is an act free of social deceit. Charlotte wants no disabling or melting tenderness. She makes love to Harry by 'striking her body against him hard, not in caress but exactly as she would grasp him by the hair to wake him from sleep.' The comparison is acute. Vital enough to strain for a release of suppressed energies, courageous and admirable in her readiness to take chances, Charlotte deceives herself only in supposing that an unencumbered act of natural living, an embrace of the sun, can be sufficient means toward personal fulfillment.

Charlotte and Harry wander off to Chicago, they have difficulty in finding work but that is not their most vexing problem. What really troubles them is that in rejecting the impersonality of the city and the deadness of middle-class existence they cannot find a way of life that might transcend the violence of their rejection. They trap themselves in a frozen gesture of protest, beyond which they cannot move. As soon as they begin eating regularly they wonder if they are not in danger of sliding into bourgeois complacency. To avoid this danger they abandon the city, moving to a desolate mining camp in Utah. Faulkner is crucially involved in this flight, for he has nothing in common with the middle-aged wisdom—perhaps merely middle-aged resignation—which would sneer at it. He is always ready to extend his sympathy to anyone who lives to the limit of power or desire. Yet he is also perceptive enough to see that the flight of Charlotte and Harry is fundamentally incoherent; and in a biting passage he shows the civilization from which the lovers had fled seeping into the remote mining camp—Harry is cheated of his wage, he has to perform an abortion on the supervisor's wife: again, the moral ugliness of the city.

Destitute, the lovers drift south, back to the Mississippi basin, where Charlotte reveals herself to be pregnant and Harry performs his second abortion, this time a failure. Now, in the opening scene of the novel, the couple is living in penniless inertia, Charlotte resentful and broken, Harry a cartoon of the independent man he had hoped to become. When Charlotte dies after the botched abortion, Harry is taken off to prison, there to nurture memories of love, in safety and emptiness—yet not total emptiness, for in some desperate way he remains faithful to the vision he could not live by. In jail he experiences a moment of overwhelming, perhaps, fulfilling, reflection:...'So it is the old mean after all, no matter how old.... Yes, he thought, between grief and nothing I will take grief.'

Thrusting its characters into a fierce, somewhat muddled yet ultimately impressive struggle against reality, 'Wild Palms' elevates that struggle to a principle of life: 'Love and suffering are the same thing.... The value of love is the sum of what you have to pay for it...' But the story also complicates and partly abandons this Romantic view. The destination of flight proves as unacceptable as its starting point, perhaps because finally there is not so much difference between the two. Neither society nor isolation can satisfy Charlotte, and Harry's satisfaction is but a dependency of hers. Living too rigidly by a preconceived code, which transforms her passion for freedom into a mode of self-tyranny, she destroys both herself and her lover.... So streaked is the life of Charlotte and Harry with the neurotic colors of the world they refuse, so fanatical is their fear of a settled existence, that they render themselves unfit for the natural haven to which they would retire. In the most extreme rural isolation they continue to live by the standards of the city, and at the end it is Harry's ineptness at abortion, a technique of civilization, which causes their catastrophe. Between the city from which they would escape and the natural world they dream of finding, there is no intermediate area of shade and rest. The act of rejection having consumed their energies, nothing remains for the act of living.

A simpler story, 'Old Man' concerns an unnamed Mississippi convict. 'About twenty-five, flat-stomached, with a sunburned face and Indian-black hair and pale, china-colored, outraged eyes,' this tall convict, as he is called, is one of Faulkner's natural men. Limited in mental power, he is superbly in control of his immediate environment and endowed with a fine, even over-acute sense of moral obligation.

He has, however, grown so accustomed to the harsh security of the prison-farm that he does not take his freedom when he can.

Brought with other convicts to the Mississippi River to help control a flood, the tall convict is instructed to rescue a woman perched on a cypress snag and a man stranded on a cotton-house roof. Rowing furiously, he finds the woman, who is far gone in pregnancy, and through his instinctive skill in adapting himself to the river they manage to drift crazily down the flood waters. Neither intimacy nor affection sweetens the life of the convict and woman; two people thrown together, they must cooperate if they are to survive, but more they will not do. It is a kind of honesty, free of the language of Romanticism.

The woman, helped by the convict, has her baby. At the first mouth of the river they end their journey, settling in Cajun country where the convict becomes the partner of an alligator hunter and again, with his marvelous affinity to natural life, proves highly successful. For the first time freedom tempts him: *'Yes. I reckon I had done forgot how good making money was. Being let to make it...I had forgot how it is to work.'* But a malicious twist of circumstances forces him to leave the alligator country and return to the prison area. *'Yonder's the boat,'* he tells the prison guard, *'and here's the woman. But I never did find that bastard on the cotton house.'* A final cut of injustice, the climax of *'Old Man'* is the sentencing of the convict to ten more years for *'attempted escape.'* What impresses him more than this injustice, however, is his memory of how difficult it was to rid himself of the pregnant woman during his time of freedom. As in most Faulkner novels, freedom proves to be elusive, and when found, limited.

Simply sketched, these are the plots of *'Wild Palms'* and *'Old Man.'* Faulkner has divided each story into five parts, alternating a part from one with a part from the other. To follow the pattern of the novel, envisage an interweaving of the following sections: (1) Failure of abortion, Charlotte close to death; (2) convict leaves for flood; (3) flashback: Charlotte and Harry leave New Orleans; (4) *'lost'* in flood; (5) flashback: drifting from country to Chicago; (6) drifting with pregnant woman on flood waters; (7) flashback: haven in a mining camp; (8) haven with Cajun; (9) Charlotte's death, Harry's imprisonment.

Is this crossing of stories mechanical and arbitrary? That Faulkner may have composed them separately and then spliced them together is not very important; the problem is, why did he connect these two stories in so unusual a way? He has said that *'I did send both stories to the publisher separately and they were rejected because they were too short. So I alternated the chapters of them.'* But he has also referred to *The Wild Palms* as one story of *'two types of love,'* and has recently declared that he wrote *'Old Man'* to bring the other story *'back into pitch'* by contrast with its *'antithesis.'* The remark is very shrewd, for *'Wild Palms'* by itself is almost intolerably painful and needs very much to be brought *'back to pitch.'*

Even a glance at the above pattern of the novel should show rough parallels between the two stories. There is the possibility that if taken together they will yield a dissonant irony or *'counterpoint'* which neither could yield alone. The possibility that any two stories by the same writer could be made to yield interesting contrasts and continuities cannot be denied; but at stake here is a relation much more detailed and intimate. Each story charts an escape from confinement to a temporary and qualified freedom and then to an ultimate, still more confining imprisonment. Two opposite intentions—one derived from extreme romanticism, the other a grudging response to circumstances—lead to the exhaustion of both intern and convict, and in that exhaustion there is a kind of common fate. Coincidence this may be, but the correspondences and joined oppositions between the two stories are so numerous and suggestive that we are obliged to take them seriously, as elements of a literary design.

Both the intern and the convict are socially homeless men who discover how intractable the world can be and how little one's hopes and ideas can move it. They are radically different men, but in the end the differences do not count for much. The convict is more resourceful and creative than the intern, perhaps because he is able to float upon the wave of circumstance rather than to dash himself against it. Where the convict helps bring new life into the world, though admittedly life for which he has no more than an abstract responsibility, the intern can only abort—and that unsuccessfully. In *'Old Man'* the life principle does rise to a rueful sort of triumph, yet it brings neither resolution nor satisfaction: it is a triumph that simply keeps the circle of existence turning. In *'Wild Palms'* a diseased hunger, not merely for life but also for clamping a rigid scheme upon life, becomes the catastrophe.

Still, in noting such contrasts we should not succumb to any pat assumption that Faulkner favors the convict over the intern, primitivism over civilization, nature over the city. The survival of the convict, ambiguous triumph though it may be, has been purchased at the price of a self-denial of personality, a rather awesome suppression of natural desires, and a loss of the vision of freedom—none of which either the characters of ‘Wild Palms’ or Faulkner himself could tolerate. If in some sense the convict proves to be more durable than the intern, there is no reason (except an indulgence in literary primitivism) to ignore the cost of that durability. At the end both men are trapped, and the familiar distinction between will and fate, character and circumstance tends to be dissolved into an ironic perception of their gradual merger.

Faulkner, I think, lends conditional assent to the rebellion of Charlotte and Harry, but with the tacit warning that rebellion becomes suicidal if pressed to a fanatic grasping for total freedom. ‘Old Man,’ with a good many sardonic qualifications, proposes a counter-term of acceptance, but this too is carried to an extreme by the convict. Rebellion and acceptance, by the end of the book, shrink in importance beside the overwhelming fact of exhaustion.

In both stories the imprisonment of the leading character is at least partly due to excesses of conscience and ideals, and Faulkner’s implicit conclusion—one may decide—is that our emotional economies thrive best on restraint. But when reading the novel itself, this is hardly the impression one is left with. The idea of restraint as a possible resolution seems, for this book, too distant and contained, inadequately rooted in the actual happenings, not a genuine option. At some points it may dimly visit us, but the true and overpowering energy of the book is directed toward another idea: that a suffering man encounters his fate through a total fulfillment of his chosen task. Both intern and convict are caught up in floods, the one a flood of passion, the other a flood of nature, the one a flood willfully sought after, the other a flood that cannot be escaped. It hardly matters, the novel seems to say, which kind of flood a man lives through; in the end it will break him, and his humanity will be marked by the fullness, the courage of his struggle against it.

The Wild Palms points to the gap between aspiration and realization, the way in which the incommensurable becomes man’s fate; and it suggests that this fate cannot be avoided through rebellion or acceptance, aggression or passivity. In the world of this novel, as perhaps in the world of all Faulkner’s novels, emotion exceeds possibility, response fails situation, and for the welling of human passion there is never a properly receptive object. It is perceptions such as these which lie behind the strain and fury of Faulkner’s prose, and which it is the function of the double plot in *The Wild Palms* both to release and qualify.

By starting ‘Wild Palms’ near its climax, Faulkner magnifies its painfulness, for once he turns to trace the history of Charlotte and Harry it is impossible to feel any hope for them. ‘Old Man,’ beginning at its chronological outset and sweeping forward with a humorous and rhythmic equanimity, serves as emotional ballast. The two stories, it should be noted, are of unequal merit and interest, ‘Old Man’ being much superior simply as a piece of writing and ‘Wild Palms’ touching upon problems that are likely to seem more urgent to a modern reader. ‘Old Man’ releases Faulkner’s gifts for the fabulous, a mode of narrative in which a human action can be subsumed under, and gain magnitude from, an imposing event in Nature. ‘Wild Palms,’ because so much of the behavior of its two lovers is caused by a willfulness bordering on stupidity, cannot reach the tragic limit toward which it strains.... But whatever one’s judgment of the stories, they do sustain each other through a counterpoint of response and should be printed, as they were offered, together.... A serious, occasionally distinguished book which contains some admirable parts and is arresting in its general scheme and intent, *The Wild Palms* merits our respect.”

Irving Howe
William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 233-42

“When Faulkner’s double novel, *The Wild Palms*, appeared in 1939, its peculiarity of structure—the alternating chapters of two long stories whose place, characters, settings, and themes seemed completely unrelated—provoked a number of reviewers to express bewilderment and outright dissatisfaction with the work as a whole. They were virtually unanimous in their praise of one of the tales, ‘Old Man,’ and unenthusiastic through not bitterly hostile toward the other, ‘Wild Palms.’ But they gravely denounced the

coupling of the stories as arbitrary, artificial, and detrimental to both narratives. Conrad Aiken raised his voice in the wilderness when he admired the book's 'fugue-like alternation of viewpoint'; but he did not suggest the relationship between this structure and the themes and characters of the stories.... It has been firmly established that the reader should recognize *The Wild Palms* as a structural experiment and that each of the stories might be profitably read in terms of the other.

'Old Man,' with its chronological plot and seeming lack of philosophical complexity, has always been the more popular work. Early critics were quick to appreciate the fundamentally allegorical qualities of this story: the nameless protagonist, the parable-like beginning, the heavy elements of fate and coincidence, the archetypal material of a voyage on water, and the ostensibly direct moral recommendation of the hero, who endures cyclopean hardships with singleness of mind and will. While 'Old Man' is not so systematic an allegory as *Pilgrim's Progress*, it will survive comparison with works like *Mardi* and *Huckleberry Finn*.... Moreover, 'Old Man' has much in common with Faulkner's earlier saga, *As I Lay Dying*, particularly that the physical obstacles faced by the voyagers in each tale are so huge and frustrating that they give the work an integral quality of grotesque humor. An allegorical reading of 'Old Man' is unquestionably enlightening; but Faulkner's pairing of 'Wild Palms' with the river tale suggests that the former story might set limits of interpretation upon the latter.

What has unfortunately been overlooked is that 'Wild Palms' itself contains many allegorical elements. It also portrays a physical and spiritual voyage. Fate and coincidence are highly instrumental to its plot. The name of the protagonist, Harry Wilbourne, embraces rich denotative possibilities, among which are 'will burn' (will suffer some infernal punishment), 'burning with will,' and 'bourne-ed (limited) by will.' Just as 'Old Man' invites comparison with *Huckleberry Finn* (although the dominant values of Mark Twain's novel are in fact inverted in 'Old Man'), 'Wild Palms' might easily be called a hysterical or inverted *Scarlet Letter*. While the symbolic content of Faulkner's story can be in part traced to such disparate sources as Dante and Hemingway, the characterizations and the theme—the complex, often destructive demands upon one another of the physical or spiritual or psychological elements in man—are immediately suggestive of Hawthorne's novel.

Furthermore, Faulkner's double-edged use of allegorical materials, with its accompanying delight in the manipulations of points of view, is at least a close cousin to Hawthorne's method. Both writers employ the moral and aesthetic weapon of puritanism, the concept of correspondence between the emblem and the thing symbolized, in making critical judgments upon the puritan's own mental anatomy. In effect, they ironically reverse allegorical expectations to illustrate the awesome pitfalls which allegorical thinking and moral preconception place in the way of human sympathy.

In both 'Wild Palms' and 'Old Man' the relationship of the protagonist to the moral framework of Southern puritanism is of central importance. Neither story was intended to stand alone, and if they are separated one sacrifices not simply a clever structural device but a vital dimension of meaning. It is the interaction of the two equivocally allegorical tales, one, like *The Scarlet Letter*, approaching fearful tragedy, and the other, like *Huckleberry Finn*, verging upon burlesque in its humor, that the reader must seek any final statement by the novelist....

"Wild Palms"

Harry Wilbourne is a renegade medical intern whose tortured and fatal romance with a married woman, Charlotte Rittenmeyer, forms the substance of 'Wild Palms.' Although he is introduced in the first chapter of the novel, the nature of his problem remains a mystery until two chapters later, when the story has its chronological beginning. Meanwhile the reader is given two other characters against whom to measure Wilbourne: the convict-protagonist of 'Old Man' and the point-of-view character of chapter one. The latter is a doctor from whom Harry and Charlotte have rented a cabin on the gulf shore where she succumbs to blood-poisoning contracted in an abortion attempt.... Called to the cabin when Charlotte suffers a hemorrhage, he learns that Harry himself had performed the abortion. The doctor's shock and revulsion almost outweigh his orthodox wrath....

The doctor's function in the story is a complex one: he is neither in diametric contrast to Wilbourne nor merely the man whom Harry might have become if he had obeyed his own tradition and training. Although

the doctor undeniably typifies the conventional and barren future from which Harry had thought he was escaping, he also serves as a full representative of those very moral scruples which prevent Wilbourne's happiness and which subconsciously—but inexorably—drive him to failure in the abortion.... And Harry is not, as several critics have assumed, a well-meaning innocent whose desire for a sincere romantic relationship with Charlotte is thwarted by the forces of nature or society. Nor is he, as one hypothesis has it, an Adamic figure corrupted by an insatiable paramour, indeed, the reverse seems to be the case.

The same Puritan preoccupation with a fixed moral and social order which has molded the doctor lies behind Wilbourne's incapacity to enjoy the pagan freedom Charlotte offers him, behind his masochistic and self-defeating efforts to refute that order, and behind his final eager acceptance of the sentence pronounced by an outraged gulf-town court. Fearful of physical love and unable to obey his conscience, Harry Wilbourne follows a course of frenzied self-punishment which culminates in his blundering and compulsive murder [botched abortion] of Charlotte.

A fellow intern, pitying him, subdues Harry's conscience...and persuades him to come to a party. Here he meets Charlotte, a passionate sculptress whose dissatisfaction with her conventional marriage is as honest as it is painful for her husband. Harry is attracted by her yellow eyes, her candor, and her strong dignity; she is struck with sympathy for his poverty and inexperience. Wilbourne's exposure and initiation to love are neatly rendered in the description of the garden of the artist's home where he meets Charlotte.... On their second meeting Harry and Charlotte admit their love for one another; she holds out to him a brave new world of sensual freedom....

Even at the outset of his adventure with Charlotte, Harry reveals the sense of guilt which will cause his tragic failure. On the train to Chicago, he reflects upon the morality of his deeds, and while he maintains disbelief in 'sin,' his definition of iniquity has a relentless inherent Puritanism of its own... Yet to Charlotte love is a religion complete in itself. She invokes the Sermon on the Mount as she suggests to Harry that they consummate their relationship immediately. For her the act will be a symbolic repudiation of conventional society and its inherited burden of remorse. As Wilbourne follows her down the aisle to a compartment he believes that 'everyone in the car must have known their history' and discerned their 'aura of unsanctity.' After they have established residence in Chicago Charlotte provides a theological definition of love: it must be 'Either heaven, or hell'... The Chicago sojourn is for him a period of continual introspection. He tries to talk himself into accepting Charlotte's theory of love, but his very self-consciousness makes the possibility of such a conversion preposterous.

A hard-bitten journalist named McCord, who admires the sincerity of Charlotte's convictions, assists the lovers in their rebellion from society when destitution compels them to leave the city. He takes them to an unoccupied cabin on a Wisconsin lake, but before returning to Chicago he recognizes Wilbourne's Puritan dilemma: 'You haven't even got the courage of your fornications, have you?' He admonishes Harry to 'Stop thinking about yourself and think about Charlotte for a while'... While Charlotte roams the woods with her sketch-pad and water-colors and sunbathes naked every day, Harry sleeps in the cabin almost constantly. When awake he lies on the bed, 'not even thinking but merely existing in a drowsy and foetuslike state.' Wilbourne is likewise passive in their lovemaking. He can neither enjoy Charlotte completely nor summon the strength to leave her.

This qualified idyll comes to an end as winter approaches. Harry is suddenly resentful of nature itself for having conspired against him to make him unaware of his moral position.... Without an organizing moral equation the relationship has become meaningless for him. Charlotte had hoped to return to prelapsarian innocence through sensuality; she had addressed him as 'Adam' and had not hidden her body; and now Harry urges in vain that she return to Chicago alone, leaving him to live (as McCord had predicted) like a hermit in the woods. Once again in the city, Charlotte finds work in a department store and Wilbourne sits at home writing erotic confession stories for the pulp magazines. This occupation, which he pursues with zest and intensity, is a means by which he can shamefully record his own preoccupations with sex, and, in making them public, indulge in the exhibitionist's self-degradation.... But even this arrangement proves unsatisfactory when he is rewarded by society, with money and respectability, for his very act of self-punishment.... Harry concludes that they must leave Chicago, and he accepts a position as a doctor at a Utah mining camp....

McCord warns Harry that his flight to Utah in midwinter is simply further imprisonment; but Wilbourne, as if to convince the journalist that he has been enlightened, launches into a violent denunciation of society and its values—which are, as we know, his own... ‘There is no place for [love] in the world today.’ Wilbourne’s noble ambition is to reconstruct love by escaping civilization, to establish a moment of perfection and ‘solitude’ in the sexual act. Finally, in a dithyrambic outburst, Harry names McCord and Charlotte as the ‘parents’ of some sacred awareness in him and requests McCord’s blessing. The journalist, realizing that selfishness and self-deception underlie all Wilbourne’s declarations and that Harry’s limitations, rather than the pressures of society, have stunted the romance, replies, ‘Take my curse.’

The Utah episode once more demonstrates Harry’s inability to find emotional peace with Charlotte. It can be understood as a nightmare attempt to purify and punish himself and his lover. When the snows begin to melt in spring, Charlotte conceives through a contraceptive accident and pleads with Wilbourne to perform an abortion upon her.... But in the light of Wilbourne’s obsession, the prospect of a child is a blessing. Like Hester’s Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* the baby will be a visible sign, for all society to see, of his guilt and sin with Charlotte. He refuses to perform the operation and takes Charlotte to Texas, where he unsuccessfully seeks employment in order to support the child when it arrives. In desperation he tries to ‘set up as a professional abortionist,’ offering to accept cases from licensed physicians as an ironic alternative to operating on Charlotte. But he has promised her that he will comply with her request if he has not found work by the fourth month, and he is held to his word....

The reason for the ‘failure’ lies in his compulsive need to punish himself and Charlotte for their life of what he has believed all the while to be sin. Charlotte’s brooding apathy, so apparent to the doctor in chapter one, results not only from her fear of death but also from her subtle recognition that her lover has sacrificed her in chastising himself.... After her death he is sentenced by a provincial jury and a righteous judge to fifty years of hard labor at a prison farm. His rejection of a chance for suicide presented by Charlotte’s husband serves as a final affirmation of his wish to enjoy the full pain of punishment....

“Old Man”

In ‘Old Man’ as in ‘Wild Palms,’ the central theme is the conflict between freedom (or sex) and the demands of a restrictive moral framework. The convict possesses a simple, unfathomable puritan ideology, and he has acquired security and dignity at a Mississippi prison farm. When during the great flood of 1927 he is sent onto the river to rescue a trapped woman, he finds himself in a world of violent, inexplicable nature, of mechanical force, and he struggles almost blindly to fulfill the duty with which he has been entrusted. The convict does not attempt to take advantage of his freedom. He does not even comprehend it, for he is in fact less free on the river than at the farm. No thought of escape disturbs his inner serenity, and upon his return, weeks later, he accepts an additional prison sentence with equanimity, even gratitude....

Imagination, the cause of Wilbourne’s defection from his internship, is directly responsible for the convict’s imprisonment. A voracious reader of detective fiction, he had studied tales of banditry with Calvinistic diligence, ‘taking the good from each and discarding the dross as his workable plan [for a train robbery] emerged.’ The robbery was a fiasco: he entered the train carrying a toy pistol and dark lantern and wearing a mask, and was captured instantly by the trainmen. After seven years at Parchman [prison], he still feels outrage ‘at the writers’ of crime stories whom he had accepted, with ‘outspoken good faith,’ as spokesmen of the truth. And now the convict has willingly renounced imagination and the ‘fluid world of his time’ just as the young Wilbourne renounced the world of sex which he believed he could never afford.... Because the convict strikes deep roots at Parchman, he comes to consider the ‘fluid’ world illusory, and the simple duties of the farm become the substance of reality. Parchman has been his home ‘almost since childhood’; here he is accepted by mules and men; here he is respected.... Sheltered from the temptations of the appetites or the imagination, the convict enjoys an anchorite’s limited horizons and unimaginable bliss....

Although he had worked the soil for years in the shadow of the levee, he had, significantly, never seen the Mississippi, the ‘Old Man’ which serves as a violent epitome of the ‘fluid’ social world the convict had abjured. Even in its backwaters, the flood resembles ‘a rifle bullet the width of a cotton field’; a cresting

wave is like 'the mane of a galloping horse'; the swirling eddies are 'iron-like and shifting convolutions like an anaconda'; and against this backdrop of lawless energy men are reduced to 'cattle,' 'dogs,' and 'ants.' Confronted with this spectacle, the convict is bewildered, his concept of the earth's stability undermined like the levees themselves. When a deputy asks him to row through the flooded farmland behind the levee to rescue a stranded woman, he assures himself that he will not have to go 'nowhere out yonder' on the raging and incomprehensible Mississippi, and then accepts the task with his customary stoicism.... Unable to explain nature's violation of his stability, he responds with intense moral resentment....

The woman has already come to symbolize to him the realm which he had denied as illusory and chaotic: the maddening and terrific flood is but a larger emblem of the mechanical fecundity which she embodies. But the river changes its course, destroying any last measure of the convict's belief in the order of external experience. Whereas the Yazoo had previously been backing up, away from the 'Old Man,' its current is now reversed by the mass of water which has broken through the levees above and which rushes in a huge crest back toward the Mississippi.... Two days pass, and the convict still obeys only his sense of obligation to the authority which has sent him into this unimaginable wilderness of water. His immediate aim is to 'get rid of the woman, the belly...in the right way.' But the endeavor fails when the convict is twice fired upon, first by a gang of criminals in a shanty boat and again by a group of soldiers at a landing below Baton Rouge. Implacable nature, no longer satisfied that he simply endure, now forces him to participate in its progress....

Looking down upon the infant, he recognizes the fundamental affinity between sex and nature, the antithesis to his settled existence at Parchman.... He at first avoids and finally almost ignores the water moccasins, which represent all that is loathsome and destructive in the 'fluid world.' His relationship to the snakes parallels his struggle with the river: rather than attempting to kill them, he simply strives to maintain his moral posture, for he is as unresponsive to evil as to freedom. During the next fortnight he and the woman live in the marshes behind the levee with a Cajun alligator hunter who takes the convict into a hunting partnership.... The reptiles, like the 'Old Man' itself, are beyond his comprehension, and he identifies them as merely a large and powerful breed of livestock....

Although the obligation to complete his mission still dominates his consciousness, he decides with surprise that he enjoys making money. But even this small pleasure, by which Faulkner gives some human depth to the allegorical outlines of the convict, is cut short by the implacable river.... Two weeks later, seven weeks after he had set out to rescue the woman, he lands the skiff at his point of departure, finds a law officer, and announces that his job is finished.... He accepts with quiet pleasure the security of his closed universe, a realm without violence and without women.... As in 'Wild Palms' the urgent passage of time is linked to the woman's reproductive function....

While Harry Wilbourne tries to burst moral limits and plunge into freedom and sex, the convict struggles to avoid involvement in that 'fluid world' and to return to the greater freedom of his circumscribed life at the prison farm. It is precisely because Harry shares the moral orientation of the doctor and the convict that he defeats himself; it is precisely because of the convict's total and slavish commitment to his moral code that he manages to endure the blows of the cosmic joker.... W. R. Moses presents the provocative idea that 'Themes—and plots are...mirror twins of an almost embarrassing degree of similarity.' He picks up Howe's equation of the 'drifting' motifs of chapters five and six, and observes that 'the convict struggles to escape a material flood,' whereas 'Harry and Charlotte struggle to remain immersed in an immaterial one, which in spite of its immateriality is just as destructive as the raging Mississippi'.... Once the fundamental ironic contrast between the stories is appreciated, the plot-alternations justify themselves....

Not only the 'mirror opposites' of plot but the consistent ironic contrasts of motivation, incident, and theme are revealed by this structural representation. The relative simplicity and directness of 'Old Man' may be seen, moreover, to throw the tragedy of 'Wild Palms' into sharp relief. In spite of the heavy ironies which appear in a comparative reading of the stories and Faulkner's apparent sympathy with the convict rather than Wilbourne, it is clear that 'Old Man' serves primarily to parody the tragic theme of the other

tale. Faulkner's major concern seems to be with Wilbourne, a credible, modern character whose incubus—guilt—is the author's special interest.

On the other hand, the convict in 'Old Man' is really a grotesque, a petrified man, an automaton who manages to reject experience and flee from the problem of existence. With his neurotic indecisiveness, Wilbourne fails not because he is diametrically opposed to the 'successful' convict but because neither resource, the convict's faith in the divinity of rules or Charlotte's faith in the power of love to deny all rules, is accessible to him. Harry's tragedy (the thesis of the novel) is caused not by the implacable forces of external nature nor by Charlotte's 'powerful sexual needs' (as Howe has said) but by his own inner weakness. His struggle throughout the story is internal. 'Old Man' serves as the antithesis of the novel; the convict succeeds because his struggle is almost purely external; his morality and mentality are all of a piece; his Herculean duel with the river is never tragic."

Joseph J. Moldenhauer
"Unity of Theme and Structure in *The Wild Palms*"
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 305-22

"Faulkner claimed that he had alternated chapters of the two short novels in order to emphasize the story of the doomed lovers through contrast with the story of the convict.... For whatever reason the two stories were joined, there is little question that they operate as a study of thematic contrast. In the alternating chapter form, the stoic endurance of the convict and the frequently dead-pan comic tone of his story offer a welcome relief from the depressing and painful adventures of Charlotte and Harry. However, the combined effect of the two stories is not lost by reading them consecutively. Strangely enough, although the majority of critics agree that 'Old Man' is the better work and quite able to stand alone, critical opinion on the two stories as a unit is mixed. A few critics consider it one of Faulkner's best novels, but most view it as one of his more minor works....

CHARACTERS

Harry Wilbourne, *medical interne, age 27*
Charlotte Rittenmeyer, *young married woman*
Francis [Rat] Rittenmeyer, *her husband*
McCord, *Chicago newspaperman*
Doctor and his wife, *owners of beach cottage in Mississippi*

"The Wild Palms"

Having lived an ascetic, almost monastic life in order to get through medical school, Harry Wilbourne is ill-prepared to cope with the world of love and rebellion from conventional society offered him by Charlotte Rittenmeyer. Because Charlotte cannot bear the necessity of sneaking out to cheap hotels in New Orleans to be with Harry, and they have no money with which to run away, they come to the verge of never seeing each other again. However, Harry finds a wallet containing nearly thirteen hundred dollars, and he and Charlotte—with her husband's knowledge and even a kind of consent—run away together to Chicago, where they work intermittently and live as long as their money lasts.

In September, having nearly run out of money, they go north to live in a Wisconsin lakeside cabin loaned to them by McCord, a newspaperman and friend of Charlotte's. In December, having run out of food, they return to Chicago, where Charlotte works as a window designer in a department store and Harry writes stories for the confession magazines. Soon, however, Harry realizes that they are heading toward a kind of 'normal' life of respectability, relative security from want, and relatively little time, because of their jobs, to be together. In order to preserve their love, or to keep love from leaving them for being unworthy of it, Harry takes a rather questionable job as a doctor in a remote Utah mining camp. However, the corruption of the cities has penetrated even to the wilds of Utah. Harry and Charlotte learn that the owner has not met his payroll in five months and in all likelihood never will again, and that all of the miners except the Poles, who do not understand their predicament, have left.

Harry and Charlotte live in a one-room cabin with the manager and his wife, and Harry is finally persuaded to perform an abortion on the woman, since the couple cannot afford to have a child. The manager and his wife leave, but soon Charlotte accidentally becomes pregnant, and asks Harry to perform an abortion on her as well. He refuses, and after opening the commissary to the Polish miners and sending them away, he and Charlotte go to the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, where they can live cheaply. Harry finally agrees to give her an abortion, but complications follow and Charlotte dies of toxemia. Harry is turned over to the police by their doctor-landlord, and though Charlotte's husband urges him to jump his bail and flee the country, Harry refuses. After his trial—at which Rittenmeyer, having promised Charlotte, tries to speak in his behalf—Rittenmeyer offers him a cyanide tablet, but Harry destroys it, preferring to live in prison and keep the memory of his love alive than to die and have it die with him.

“Old Man”

A tall convict, in Parchman Penitentiary for attempted train robbery, is sent with a group of other prisoners to aid rescue parties during the great Mississippi flood of 1927. He is sent out in a skiff with a plump convict with instructions to pick up a woman stranded in a tree and a man on a cottonhouse, but the skiff is caught in a current and overturned. The plump convict climbs to safety. Picked up along with the man on the cottonhouse, he reports that the tall convict has been drowned.

Actually, the tall convict manages to recover the boat, though it smashes into his nose, and he tries to go back for his partner and the man and woman he was told to rescue. Helping the woman from a cypress clump, he realizes that she is far gone in pregnancy. He follows the current, believing he is going downstream and expecting to pass a town, but in reality the floodwaters are carrying him up the Yazoo toward the terrific crest formed by the force of the backed-up river water. Somehow the boat survives the impact of being caught by the crest, and the Yazoo, heading downstream again, carries it past Vicksburg and out into the Mississippi. Later the convict finds himself in a second tributary which, like the Yazoo, is flowing backwards. He meets a shantyboat and is given some canned food and bread, and, sensing that another massive wave is building up ahead of him, flees before it into the Atchafalaya River basin. Making his way into Baton Rouge, he tries to surrender, but is shot at and flees. Again hit by a wave, he finally finds a snake-infested Indian mound above the water.

Almost as soon as the boat is beached the woman gives birth, the convict assisting with the sharp edge of a tin can to cut the umbilical cord and a piece of shoelace to tie it. Having lost his paddle, the convict spends six days burning a sapling into a rough paddle shape before he and the woman and child can set off again. With no idea where he is, he hears again the sound of ‘deliberate and irresistible and monstrously-disturbed water’ and thinks it is a third wave. Fortunately, it is a steamboat on its way to New Orleans with a boatload of Cajuns. The convict also asks to be taken to Parchman, but is misunderstood and taken to Carnarvon.

Somehow he manages to drag his boat down the sixty-foot levee into a bayou, in which he comes upon the stilt-supported shack of a Cajun alligator hunter. The Cajun takes in the convict and his passengers, though the two men cannot speak each other's language. The Cajun teaches the convict to hunt alligators, with the unspoken understanding that they will divide the money they make equally. After ten days the Cajun leaves precipitously, trying to explain his sudden departure and encouraging the convict and the woman to come with him, but they remain behind. The following morning a motor launch appears at the shanty to take them away, since the levee is to be dynamited to prevent Baton Rouge from being flooded. The convict, still refusing to leave his skiff behind, is taken with the woman and child to New Orleans, from whence they slowly make their way back up the Mississippi, still flood-swollen but no longer dangerous, to Parchman. The convict completes his seven-week journey by meeting the deputy with the words, ‘Yonder's your boat, and here's the woman. But I never did find that bastard on the cottonhouse.’ Though he had been officially discharged from the penitentiary as drowned, he is given an additional ten-year sentence for attempted escape—which the tall convict accepts philosophically....

COUNTERPOINT

In the double novel the story of Harry and Charlotte is of greater importance, although, of course, each story is modified and intensified by its relation to the other. Read singly, the story of the lovers seems to be only an example of the destructiveness of romanticism carried to an extreme simplification and near-glorification of primitive mentality and unimaginative endurance pitted against the unleashed forces of nature. When seen as a complementary part of a whole, however, each story is an extreme example of man's attempt to live in a hostile environment. Ironically—and it is from this irony that the book derives much of its power—each set of protagonists is striving toward a condition that the other strives to avoid: the lovers seek to escape from a loveless and empty world of security and respectability, and search for solitude and a free, natural environment in which love—and they—can survive; the convict, thrust out into the flood, wants nothing more than to get away from unharnessed nature and back to the secure and ordered world of the prison.

Charlotte and Harry repudiate the claims of social duty, she by leaving her husband and children, he by abandoning his internship and career, for the sake of their love; the convict is faithful to his duty to an extreme degree, caring for the woman and the skiff in his charge with the same impersonal concern—a concern less for their safety *per se* than for carrying out the orders given him. Harry avoids working as much as possible, and quits a job he has come to enjoy (writing for the confession magazines) because it is threatening to make him a respectable member of society; the convict finds, during his stay with the Cajun, the joy of working, and realizes that during his seven years in prison he has 'been permitted to toil but not to work.' Harry eventually is sentenced to fifty years in prison as a result of his love for a woman; the convict's story ends with his contemptuous comment, 'Women--!' These parallels and contrasts, only roughly sketched here, form the backbone of the novel, giving it a structure and depth that each story, taken individually, lacks.

The middle-aged moralistic doctor with whom 'The Wild Palms' opens provides a partial key to the characters of both Harry and the convict. Living inside a rigid, puritan world order, the doctor has, in a negative sense, retained a kind of innocence, the result of a refusal to see evil and suffering. Neither he nor his wife speak the fact that they both sense—that Harry and Charlotte are not married—for to do so would be to give the fact a reality that they could not ignore, and they would be forced to throw the couple out. Similarly, the doctor resists his dawning realization of the cause of Charlotte's illness.... It is this type of puritanistic eclipse of reality, the negative innocence of the penny-pinching, ascetic life he has led up to the time he met Charlotte, that Harry seeks to escape through love. He thus defies love and the sexual experience (both he and Charlotte regard love as a gift that will not remain with those who are unworthy of it, a visitation of divine grace, as it were) as the means of achieving a timeless state of prelapsarian innocence, a condition that antedates guilt rather than atones for it.

Unfortunately, though Harry can escape to a certain degree the respectable life that he believes will kill love, he cannot escape from the puritan within himself, the guilt-ridden fallen Adam whose conscience demands confession, sacrifice, and punishment for his rebellion against the mores of his world. Thus Harry is literally pitted against himself; he is his own destroyer. During his sojourn by the Wisconsin lake, he tries to escape from time by slipping into a passive, foetuslike condition—yet he occupies himself by constructing a calendar based on Charlotte's menstrual periods. Thus he himself brings time into his Eden, cunningly using the very Nature which has lulled him through the timeless and imperceptibly merging days.... When he finally—and almost inevitably—bungles Charlotte's abortion, he explains that it is because he loves her.... But it is also that, as both the partner in his guilt and his most precious possession, Charlotte must be sacrificed. In his search for the punishment his conscience demands, he evades Charlotte's pleas for him to leave, readily admits having performed the fatal abortion, and accepts his sentence....

If the story of Charlotte and Harry is an allegory of the crippling effects of guilt and the inability of the modern puritan to escape his conscience, the story of the convict in 'Old Man' is an allegory of innocence, of 'natural,' almost unconscious man whose social responses are little beyond those of an automaton, and whose reactions to the dangers of the chaotic river are—aside from a fervent desire to get back to the security of prison—the instinctive processes of an animal. Significantly, he is bothered by no guilt over his

attempted robbery; he merely feels that he had been betrayed by the western dime novelists, on whose fictitious robberies he had based his own crime—no crime to him, but ‘a chosen gambit in the living and fluid world of his time.’ Having proved to his own satisfaction that he had failed to be the best in his chosen career in that fluid world, he accepts the security and order of his prison life happily.... Turned out of his snug heaven to help with flood relief, his one concern is to fulfill his obligation and return....

Harry’s need to escape from the world, spurred by an internal conflict that he can neither reconcile nor evade, creates a frantic tension, a sense of despairing urgency, in both his flight and his relationship with Charlotte. Balancing this is the convict’s unresisting acceptance of his situation—an acceptance so unimaginative that even fear is lacking—and the comic tone that results from his absurd imperturbability in the face of an unknown and dangerous world. As an innocent, the convict passes unscathed and almost unconcerned through the chaos of the flood, except for the absurd comedy of his persistent nosebleeds. The water moccasins of the snake-infested garden-mound ignore him, and even the surly shantyboat people give him and the woman food. His sojourn with the Cajun provides another example of men in a state of primitive innocence. Having no language in common, they nevertheless manage to understand each other and, without even a spoken compact, let alone a written agreement, each trusts the other in the matter of the dividing of the skins. In this pre-Edenic world none of the commercial appurtenances and guarantees of civilization are necessary; man is able to meet man on a mutual basis of understanding and trust.

The circularity of the stories—each opens at the same location in space (though not, in ‘Old Man,’ in time) that it ends—suggests a parallel to the cyclicity of life. In ‘The Wild Palms’ the protagonists resist, in the name of love and freedom, the rigidity of their society that forces its members ‘to conform, or die.’ The convict, at the opposite pole of experience, finds even the preprison world ‘fluid’; cast out on the flood—symbolically and almost literally the dark, faceless sea of the Creation myths—he yearns for the order and regimentation of the prison. It is not simply ironic that the protagonists in each of the stories long for a condition that their environment does not provide; more important, they embody the constant striving of life from stasis to fluidity and on again.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 136-42

“By juxtaposing a tale of man in nature with one of man in society, Faulkner sets into relief those characteristics of the modern world that make society unnatural and that alienate modern man from his own nature and from the natural conditions of existence.... The book was recognized as an experiment in literary counterpoint, and with that concession to Faulkner’s intentions, the stories were subsequently reprinted separately. The separation...destroys a novel of remarkable depth and startling ingenuity.... The reader is forced, by this technique, to become an active participant in the process of literary creation. He must establish the thematic relationship of the stories, recognize the parallels and discover the truth.... Faulkner may have added another dimension to the modern novel by permitting his reader to indict himself for sympathizing with the kind of romantic love the author is satirizing.... The sane, realistic attitude of the protagonist of ‘Old Man,’ the convict, and the humor with which his story is told, permit us to withdraw, at least temporarily, from the plight of the lovers. Our perspective is broadened, we become aware not only of their extravagances, but of the excesses that our own sympathies have led us into....

There are many indications in both stories that the genesis of *The Wild Palms* may have been an annoyed reaction to the tendency in literature to romanticize love excessively. There is even much evidence that Faulkner may have had his contemporary, Ernest Hemingway, in mind. There are a number of interesting parallels between Charlotte and Harry’s love affair in ‘Wild Palms,’ and Catherine and Henry’s in *A Farewell to Arms*. A number of settings that Faulkner chooses—the lake and the isolated mining camp, for example—seem arbitrary until they are compared with Hemingway’s settings. The cryptic reference to Hemingway by the newspaper reporter McCord in his strange and irrelevant response to Charlotte’s strange and irrelevant toast may be a clue to the inspiration of *The Wild Palms*: ‘...Set, ye armourous sons, in a sea of hemingwaves’.... One is almost tempted to rename “Wild Palms” and call it ‘A Farewell to Love.’ Faulkner’s story carries Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* one step further and sets the love of Catherine Barkley and Frederick Henry into the same category as those other ideals that Frederick Henry emerged from the Po River cleansed of forever....

Harry Wilbourne, the man who gives up everything for love, is probably the most incompetent, silly, and unmanly lover in all literature. As McCord points out, Harry lacks the courage of his fornications. At twenty-seven, and four months away from being a full-fledged doctor of medicine, he is in a retarded state of adolescence. His ideas about the nature of the female are, to be kind, immature. He is stickily romantic—truly, a ‘ninth-rate Teasdale,’ as McCord observes. As a lover, Wilbourne is an insult to the entire male sex. The sexual relationship he establishes with Charlotte is so unmasculine that it borders on sheer comedy. He is continually being attacked by his virile partner.... Charlotte so continually makes love to Harry, and Harry so continually submits to her attacks with his breathless ‘Yes, Yes, Yes,’ that it is not without shock that we discover that it is Charlotte who becomes pregnant....

It is perhaps possible to accept her aggressive sexuality as an unconventional and honest response to her desires, but one need not be anchored in bourgeois morality to be disturbed by her neat intellectual somersault when she justifies abandoning her two children.... Viewed objectively, the love Charlotte and Harry seek is the romantic love, idealized to the point of absurdity, of pulp-fiction.... The protagonist of ‘Old Man’ is a victim of literary Romanticism. The escapade that makes him a convict is inspired by pulp-fiction.... The combined stories in the novel constitute a satire on romantic love, but they are also much more: they dramatize a view of reality and human existence; they indict our culture for substituting symbol for reality; and they study, in something like mythological terms, the mysterious relationship of the male and the female.... The fable [‘Old Man’] is about simple, inarticulate people in an environment that seems to evoke that of Genesis. Below the surface details of the story are elemental patterns and types....

The convict is also out of historical time. In his battle against the flood, he is elemental man struggling to provide safety, food, and shelter for the childbearer, the earth-mother. And Harry Wilbourne is elemental man bewitched by the demon goddess Lilith.... The pregnant woman in ‘Old Man’ is Eve the mother. Charlotte in ‘Wild Palms’ is Eve the temptress. And Harry and the convict are Adam, on the one hand, tempted by Eve, and on the other hand, Adam trapped into caring for Eve the mother. As in most mythological stories, the viewpoint is masculine. The two women seem to embody the extremes of ‘the female principle’: the mother and the Lilith. Between these alien forces—oppressive responsibility that he does not want, and bewitching seduction that destroys him—the male seems to be trapped. Like Adam, both of Faulkner’s heroes are dragged from the serene security of Eden to face the outrages of a fearful and violent existence.... In both stories, the principal male characters are continually described as being in a state of amazement or incredulity or outrage; and both are somehow a victim [sic] of the mysterious female principle that seems to represent uncontrollable forces....

The conjoined narrative...sums up succinctly the difference between the tall convict’s and Harry’s responses to their separate but similar encounters with an overwhelming force—the roaring flood waters and the raging passion of love. Both men begin and end their adventures in a monastic world; both are unusually naïve about women; both are uprooted, by chance, from a secure, routine existence; and both, in the end, choose the all-male world of prison. Together, they have spanned the extremes of the female principle, from mother Eve to Lilith Eve....

Charlotte has neither the inclination nor the desire to mask their illicit relationship. It is Harry, himself, who seeks respectability, who has to keep fighting against his desire to be a husband.... It has often been [argued] that Faulkner’s theme in ‘Wild Palms’ is that society has no place in it for love. The truth is that Charlotte and Harry are not harassed by society because they are living in sin. On the contrary, almost everyone, including Charlotte’s forsaken husband, goes out of his way to abet them. The only external force that poses a real threat to their love is poverty. The lovers are victims, as were most Americans living in or out of sin during the 1930’s, of a collapse in the national economy. Except for one brief period, the lack of money haunts them throughout their year together. But poverty is far less a threat to them than their slavish romanticism. Even ignoring the historical fact that by 1938 the economy was beginning to recover, their decision to leave Chicago and go to the lake and love until starvation overtakes them or McCord finds one of them a job is a species of sentimental bravado that borders on the stupid. It is...a sentimental absorption in self-pity....

When society fails to ostracize them morally and socially, and poverty no longer can bolster Harry’s romantic image of ‘two damned and doomed and isolated forever against the world and God,’ he resorts to

respectability.... Harry's image of 'respectability' is children.... It is not society, but Harry's own bourgeois instincts that pose this absurd threat to their love. He sums it all up when he says, 'I had turned into a husband.' But why, one must ask, go all the way out to a mine in Utah to escape respectability? Why not just move out of the comfortable bourgeois apartment and into a bohemian apartment in a bohemian section of the city, where it might even be cheap enough so that Charlotte can stay home with Harry while he writes his pulp-magazine stories to provide for their simple wants?

Responding to McCord's cynical questions, Harry declares that there is no place for love 'in the world today.' The statement is romantic self-pity that the facts contradict. Harry and Charlotte are not out of step with their generation and time. They are so much in lockstep with it that they are out of step with life itself. They are personifications of their society, carrying to an extreme one of the symbols that their culture has substituted for reality.... Love, for instance, as Charlotte conceives it, is an ideal separated from its roots in the natural sexual function of the human being. It becomes an end in itself, expressed through sexual contact but isolated from the natural purpose of sex.... Charlotte is the fanatical high priestess of this religion, and Harry is her acolyte.... Harry's first eight months of love are, in many ways, parallel to the convict's initial experiences on the flooded river.... Harry, too, learns how to swim, but his adventure ends tragically. The paradox of these companion tales is that the fable end with reality and the realistic story deals with the fabulous. 'Old Man' presents the human tragedy comically; 'Wild Palms,' the human comedy tragically....

'Old Man' is essentially a parable. The forces in nature that control the conditions of human existence are embodied in the majestic Mississippi river, the Old Man. The colloquial term for father applied to the father of waters carries with it the suggestion of deity, God the Father. The convict, who is deliberately unnamed is Man, and his unnamed companion is Woman.... The very texture of the swelling sentences in the descriptions of the cresting flood evokes the terrible power of the Old Testament God and sweeps us, with the Man and Woman in the skiff, beyond time and temporal civilization. The Indian mound on which the convict finally lands is the earth in the reptilian age, emerging from the waters. Here, in this prehistoric world where the snake predominates, the human female fulfills her childbearing function, and the male assumes the responsibility of caring for mother and infant. As the earliest men must have done, the convict fashions a paddle by burning a tree to size and by shaping the wood with fire. And later in the bayous, protected only by a loincloth and armed with a mace and knife, he grapples with that vestige of prehistoric time, the alligator, to provide for his charges. In short, the convict is primitive man—man stripped of the accumulated layers of civilization, to expose man's fundamental relationship to the natural world....

Abortion is the logical finale of this love that is, from the outset, so abnormal that the natural male-female roles are psychically reversed. Its abnormality is apparent, too, in the personal relationship of the lovers, who actually have nothing in common but their romantic enslavement to the idea of love and its manifestation in sex. Their conversation is limited to the subject of love; when they are not talking about love or making love, they move on parallel but separate tracks.... At the lake, when they are completely alone, they seem to have less in common than ever.... Harry comes to think of nature as a whore seducing him into a lethargy that nearly destroys them. It never occurs to him that he could replenish their larder, keep them alive to love, by fishing or even hunting....

Their tragic finale begins with her pregnancy, the natural consequence of male-female love, and ends by a failure of abortion, an attempt to destroy life.... By submitting to Charlotte's idea of love, [Harry] denies his maleness by fighting against his nature, his irrepressible desire to serve as husband, protector, and provider.... Although they represent a *reductio ad absurdum* of the romantic fallacy, Charlotte and Harry are not alien to their culture; they are its epitome. Theirs is the tragedy of a culture that has lost sight of its relationship to nature, that has falsified values by abstracting them from function....

Harry's moral integrity is put to the ultimate test by Charlotte's insistence that he perform an abortion. Tragedy befalls them because he does not resist her pleas. Harry's failure at abortion is clearly a failure to give himself to love as completely as does Charlotte. He bungles the operation because he cannot make his moral instinct subservient to her ideal.... It is the masculine in Harry that ultimately destroys Charlotte and her perverse ideal of love.... Though the lovers have been selfish, silly, and blundering, their suffering gives them some stature, and the final chapter contains some of the finest writing in this story. Harry's

anguish throbs in the lines. Death becomes palpable, choking off breath. The palm outside the jail, suddenly shaking though there is no wind, becomes a symbol of the wild, short love Harry shared with Charlotte, and the black wind that blows in from the sea is the death of their romantic idyll.”

Edmond L. Volpe
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Michael Hollister (2015)