ANALYSIS

“A Justice” (1931)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

This story is told at first by Quentin Compson, who also narrates “That Evening Sun” and *Absalom, Absalom!*, then commits suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*. As a boy he used to ride out of town to his Grandfather Compson’s farm, in the front seat beside his grandfather and the black servant Roskus, with his sister Caddy and his brother Jason in the back. The horses “would carry the surrey fast along the levels and up some of the hills even. But this was in north Mississippi and on some of the hills Roskus and I could smell Grandfather’s cigar.” They could smell the cigar because the horses slowed pace going up the steeper hills of north Mississippi so the smoke did not blow away as it did going down. Faulkner often requires the reader to infer *why* something is happening, to induce concentration on meaning.

Quentin tells the story of Sam Fathers, a “clever carpenter” who maintains the farm of old Grandfather Compson, a setting that affirms agrarian pastoralism in the tradition of Jefferson. Samuel is a name for God and to be a carpenter in American literature is frequently Christ-evoking. Faulkner is both a pantheist like Melville, Thoreau and Hemingway, and also an existential Christian like Thoreau and Hemingway. Sam Fathers is half black and half Indian, doubling his identification with the dispossessed and with divine Nature, which is being lost to modern civilization. Almost a hundred years old, Sam is the archetypal wise old man, a pantheistic counterpart of Christ who saves the soul of Ike McCaslin in *The Bear.* Quentin understands all this, yet is unable to save himself. The dissociation of whites like Quentin from the truth in Nature is evident in that white people called Sam a Negro. “But he wasn’t a Negro,” Quentin says. “That is what I’m going to tell about.”

Quentin is a white boy conditioned in the decadent tradition of the old southern aristocracy. He never succeeds in fully overcoming his racist mindset before he kills himself, nor does Ike McCaslin, nor does Huckleberry Finn. Quentin thinks of Sam as a “nigger” even while respecting and seeking him out, just as Huck thinks of Jim even while choosing to go to Hell for him. Sam himself refers to the blacks he lives among as “niggers.” Twain and Faulkner are Realists who told the truth about how people talked. In this story the blacks tell the truth about Sam’s mixed blood by calling him a Blue-Gum. In our oppressive politically correct culture, however, truth is censored, as in the recent expurgated edition of *Huckleberry Finn* (2011), illustrating that academics today are less tolerant than the Victorians.

The physical description of Sam Fathers conveys his strength, integrity, stoicism, and transcendence: “He was straight in the back…his face was still all the time, like he might be somewhere else all the while he was working or when people, even white people, talked to him…like he might be away up on a roof, driving nails.” Up on a roof at almost 100 years old! Sam maintains his balance. He is not driven by his work, unlike many white men. Sometimes, whenever he feels like it, he quits and has a smoke. Sam is independent, his own man, and he transcends the racism that demeans him by ignoring it. “And he wouldn’t jump up and go back to work when Mr. Stokes or even Grandfather came along.”

Sam tells Quentin the story of his birth, a pantheistic analogue to the Gospels humorously contrasted to the birth of Christ. Like Christ, Sam had two fathers. At birth he was named Had-Two-Fathers by the plantation owner where he was raised among slaves. The plantation owner was not a white man but an Indian, a Chickasaw chief. Contrary to the idealization of primitive cultures by liberal academics, Indians of many tribes engaged in slavery, torture, butchery, and cannibalism.

II

Quentin hears the story from Sam Fathers who heard it from Herman Basket. This technique of a story within a story within a story is common in Faulkner, giving the totality the qualities of a legend. Sam’s

style compared to Quentin's is straightforward, plain and simple with no perplexing sentences like the one ending Quentin's first paragraph.

The Chickasaw chief who owns the slave plantation is named Doom, foretelling the fate of his tribe and giving the story an allegorical dimension. Slavery is a curse. The fall of the Indian tribe prefigures the subsequent fall of the aristocratic Old South, illustrating that the evils of slavery are not exclusive to whites. Doom prefigures Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* Indians enslaved each other and blacks enslaved blacks in Africa and sold them to whites. Doom brings back slaves from the city of whites, but "they already had more black people in the plantation than they could find use for. Sometimes they would run the black men with dogs, like you would a fox or a cat or a coon." Before Doom, however, the chief of the tribe was so easygoing his only ambition was to play mumble-peg.

Doom went to New Orleans and got corrupted by civilization. His imitation of whites is evident in his taking the name of a white steamboat captain: "From now on, my name is not Ikkemotubbe. It's David Callicoat. And someday I'm going to own a steamboat, too." Callicoat sounds like calico and turncoat. He returns to his tribe ambitious, with a "gold box of New Orleans salt about the size of a gold watch." The gold connotes the prevailing values of the whites in the big city, and the watch is a recurrent symbol in Faulkner representing civilization, the tyranny of linear time in modern consciousness, and dissociation from Nature. Inside the box of civilization, its "salt" is actually poison. Doom dramatizes his heartless will to power by killing a puppy with the poison inside a "bullet of bread," demonstrating that he will murder the innocent. "That was the kind of man that Doom was." He was that way before he went among the whites—he had a "bad eye"—but he returns from the whites armed with the poison of their values: "He wore a coat with gold all over it [Callicoat], and he had three gold watches." Like the rich in general, he has far more than he needs and is greedy for still more.

After he brings more slaves to the tribe and kills the puppy, "'My name is Doom now,' Doom said." Ironically, he is mispronouncing French words he overheard in New Orleans. "'It means The Man,' Doom said." Herman Basket points out that Doom cannot become The Man, or Chief, because he is not in the hereditary line. Doom then begins making campaign promises, disrupting the order of succession in the tribe and seizing power by murder and intimidation under the pretense of democracy. A natural politician, he promises to give something to everyone.

Doom tests his power on the brother of the chief, Sometimes Wakeup, by poisoning another puppy in front of him. "When they left, Herman Basket said how Sometimes Wakeup burned a stick and covered his head with the blanket." Most people are asleep most of the time like Sometimes Wakeup and when they wake up they are easily frightened. Rather than take action, they cover their heads with a blanket. Today the function of the blanket is performed by media cover-ups. The simplicity of the characters, their common human traits and their rudimentary speech give the story the universality of an animal fable more complex than Aesop, dramatizing how tyrants come to power.

The Indians are slow to grasp what is happening when "the Man began to act strange at his food" and died and then the Man's son "acted strange and then died too." Sometimes Wakeup is next in succession but he "does not want to be the Man…. He is sitting in his cabin with his head in his blanket." No one has the courage to resist Doom. "So Doom was the Man. But Herman Basket said that pappy's ghost would not be easy." Pappy's "ghost" is his spirit, including his conscience. Herman Basket's ghost is "still walking," having not yet arrived at a decision about what to do. Like most politicians Doom does not keep his campaign promises. Pappy is the only one who stands up to Doom at all, yet when he approaches Doom about the slave woman, he is too intimidated by now to make eye contact. His ghost is uneasy. "'I think you don't trust me,' Doom said. 'I think you still believe that that puppy was sick'." No longer naïve, pappy says, "'I think it was a well dog'."

III

The ambition of Doom mimics white plantation owners who built themselves palatial mansions with slave labor. Since nobody in the tribe is an architect, Doom decides to make a grounded steamboat his mansion. He orders his people to drag the steamboat 12 miles through the mud, laboring like slaves to build a pyramid for a pharaoh. At least the ancient Egyptians were faithful to their culture. These Indians are

being forced to serve values and a social order alien to their own. They are out of their element, like the steamboat on land. The absurdity is comical.

All the people of the tribe run away from Doom, but he hunts them down with dogs like slaves, like the black people. Doom thinks of them collectively rather than as individuals—as “the People.” He deprives them of their freedom, making the men sleep in his house with the dogs to bark alarms if they try to run away. “’I don’t think you trust me,’ Doom said. ‘I trust you,’ pappy said. ‘That is what I would advise,’ Doom said. ‘I wish you could advise that to my ghost,’ pappy said.” Doom’s relentless tyranny is conveyed by his repetition of the line, “That is what I would advise.” Pappy’s ghost, or conscience, is not the same as a white man’s, however. After Doom buys the steamboat from three white men for ten slaves, paying for it like a white man would, pappy deals with the white men like an Indian.

Herman Basket does not think it is right to kill white men “but pappy said how they could fill the white men with rocks and sink them in the river and nobody would find them.” It would be wrong only if they got caught. Faulkner cherishes the natural life and mourns its loss in the modern world, but he is no primitive. With comic understatement, he conveys how matter-of-fact the Indians are about killing people. The murders and disembowelings are taken for granted: “So Herman Basket said they overtook the three white men and the ten black people, then they turned back toward the boat.” Such butchery is so commonplace among them it is not worth mentioning. In the late 20th century Postmodern academics who idealized Native Americans did not teach this story in their courses.

After killing the white men and sinking them in the river pappy tells the black men to go “help make the steamboat get up and walk. I will take this woman on home.” The black husband objects with comic simplicity: “This woman is my wife…. I want her to stay with me.” Pappy threatens him, much like Doom: “’Do you want to be arranged in the river with rocks in your inside too?’ pappy said to the black man.” The institution of slavery among the Indians had not broken the spirits of black men as it later did when imposed by the white aristocracy: “’Do you want to be arranged in the river yourself?’ the black man said to pappy. ‘There are two of you, and nine of us’.”

“Herman Basket said that pappy thought.” Pappy’s thought usually amounts to stalling before reversing course. Hereafter he becomes increasingly comical for his lust, frustrations, and pretense of conformity. He feigns sickness and a back injury from “lifting the steamboat” and stays behind at the Plantation with the women. When Doom and the black husband and other workers return from the steamboat that night, Doom sends for pappy. “He asked pappy if the sickness had moved. Pappy said how the sickness moved very slow.” Doom says pappy should sit in the Spring at night too. He will send one of the black people to keep a fire burning for him—the husband of the slave woman pappy is lusting after. “’I think my back is better,’ pappy said’.” Pappy’s rapid tactical retreat is in the tradition of deadpan southern humor best exemplified by Mark Twain. “’Let us try it,’ Doom said. ‘I know my back is better… The sickness began to move suddenly,’ pappy said. ‘It has reached my feet since noon today…. ‘Perhaps you had better sit in the Spring tonight to make sure,’ Doom said. ‘I know it will be gone by morning,’ pappy said.”

IV

Doom luxuriates on the front deck of the steamboat while it is being dragged along by ropes, with a boy shading him and another boy with a branch “to drive away the flying beasts.” The comic overstatement “beasts” is hyperbole, evoking prehistoric monsters and primal Nature. Pappy proposes to settle his rivalry with the husband of the slave woman through a cockfight. “The black man said he told pappy he did not have a cock, and that pappy said that in that case the black man lost by default and that the woman belonged to pappy. As a slave, the black man has no cock—he is emasculated and powerless.

Doom loans his own cock to the black man, “the one better cock in the Plantation than pappy’s.” When pappy sees the black man put Doom’s cock into the pit against his own cock, he suddenly acquires a sense of injustice: “’This is not right,’ pappy said. ‘We ought not to let him risk his wife on a cock fight’.” He picks up his cock and the black man asks him if he withdraws. “’Let me think,’ pappy said. He thought. The People watched. The black man reminded pappy of what he had said about defaulting. Pappy said he

did not mean to say that and that he withdrew it." But the People force him to live up to his contract: 'All right,' pappy said. 'But I am being taken advantage of'."

The rivals agree that a cockfight will not settle anything, but the black man wants to fight anyway and enjoys a revenge that understatement makes hilarious: "Pappy put his cock back into the ring. Herman Basket said that pappy's cock was dead before it had time to act strange, even. The black man's cock stood upon it and started to crow, but the black man struck the live cock away and he jumped up and down on the dead cock until it did not look like a cock at all, Herman Basket said."

Both pappy and the black husband have their cocks "in the pit." When the black man comes to Doom to complain the next time, pappy sneaks away. The black man shows Doom his wife's new baby and asks for justice. The scene is a comic echo of the famous judgment made by King Solomon that a disputed child should be cut in half, a decision ridiculed by Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. The color of this baby indicates that the father must be pappy. "'Do I get justice?' the black man said." The answer implied by the story is No, nobody ever gets justice. The best we might get is an *adjustment*, as suggested by the title "A Justice"—a-*just*-us. "'I don't see that justice can darken him any,' Doom said." Pappy is hiding right there with them in the black man's cabin yet they have not been able to see him—though the black man is looking for him very intently with his fiery red eyes. Pappy capitalizes on situations but "pappy" is not capitalized, is generic and is not even a name, as if to suggest that pappy maintains a low profile in order to get away with things, like impregnating women.

Pappy is the irresponsible impregnator, a male type familiar to women. Doom sees pappy indulgently as a natural man, one of "these wild bucks of the woods." He also sees the black man's rage as natural and so makes an *adjustment*: He names the baby Had-Two-Fathers. It is ironic and encouraging how different from his pappy Sam becomes, much as Huck Finn is different from his Pap. In this analogue to the birth of Christ, contrasting the earthly with the divine, the comic focus is on human nature rather than the savior and the tone is humorous rather than reverent. Sam Fathers did not originate in immaculate conception, but in adultery. The People in this nativity are not saved, they are Doomed.

V

The other *adjustment* is the fence Doom forces pappy and Herman Basket to build around the cabin of the black couple. The black man can leap over the fence, whereas pappy cannot even climb it: "'Climb this fence, and I will give you the woman,' Doom said…. 'Let me go under this fence,' pappy said." Like a rat. The black man flies back and forth over the fence "like a bird." Then he shows off his new baby son with pride in his blackness, holding "the new man up so they could see it above the fence. 'What do you think about this for color?' he said." Here the fence, a color barrier, protects the black man and his wife, giving him some pride. In contrast, the slavery imposed by white aristocrats in the Old South reversed the color barrier. Whites readily crossed it, whereas blacks were lynched on rumors and lost their pride.

Quentin responds to the call from his grandfather without understanding the meaning of Sam's story: "I was just twelve then, and to me the story did not seem to have got anywhere, to have had point or end." When his grandfather asks him what he and Sam were talking about, Quentin's answer—"Nothing, sir…. We were just talking"—is ironic because Sam's fable is about so much. Quentin remembers Sam Fathers "like something looked upon after a long time in a preservative bath in a museum." He will not understand the meaning of Sam and his story until it is too late to save himself: "I would have to wait until I had passed on and through and beyond the suspension of twilight. Then I knew that I would know. But then Sam Fathers would be dead." Allegorically, Sam is the soul in the secular modern world. By the time Quentin understands what he means, his own spirituality is dead and he kills himself.

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