

ANALYSIS

“Dry September” (1931)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“Two other stories, published in the early thirties, are particularly strong in social meanings: [‘A Rose for Emily’ and] ‘Dry September,’ a rasping account of a lynching, very powerful but close to stereotype in its acceptance of the view that Southern ladies are likely to accuse black men when they have prolonged difficulty in finding white ones...

We witness in Faulkner’s novels a quick and steep ascent: from benevolence to recognition of injustice, from amusement over idiosyncrasies to a principled concern with status, from cozy familiarity to a discovery of the estrangement of the races. Realizing that despite their physical nearness Negroes must coil large parts of themselves beyond the vision of white society, Faulkner remarks in the story ‘The Old People’ upon ‘that impenetrable wall of ready and easy mirth which negroes sustain between themselves and white men.’ Instead of being easily reached, the Negro is now locked behind suspicion...a human being whom the whites can seldom know... As Faulkner discovers the difficulty of approaching Negroes, he also develops an admirable sense of reserve, a blend of shyness and respect; trusting few of his preconceptions he must look at everything afresh.

A curious result of this growth in perception is, occasionally, a loss of concreteness in the presentation of character. Faulkner’s discovery of the power of abstraction as it corrupts the dealings men have with one another, can lead him to portray Negroes in abstract terms. If the mob in *Light in August* looks upon black men as ‘Negro’ in order to brutalize them, Faulkner sometimes looks upon them as ‘Negro’ in order to release his sympathy. Joe Christmas and Charles Bon are sharply individualized figures, but there also hangs over them a racial aura, a halo of cursed blackness. In an early story, ‘Dry September,’ this tendency toward the abstraction of character is still clearer; like a paradigm of all lynching stories, it is populated not with men but with Murderer and Victim.”

Irving Howe
William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 70, 127

“A Negro, Will Mayes, is accused of attacking a white woman, the forty-year-old spinster and former belle, Minnie Cooper. Though there is more than a hint that the attack existed only in Miss Cooper’s slightly warped and hysterical imagination, and though the sensible and sympathetic barber, Hawkhurst, tries to speak in favor of the Negro, a small group of men take Mayes out and kill him. The character of McLendon, who had commanded troops in France and who leads the lynching party, is somewhat similar to that of Percy Grimm, the fanatic patriot and leader of the mob in *Light in August*.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 165-66

Michael Hollister (2015)