

A Study of *Intruder in the Dust*

by Junichi Nakamura

I

In Yoknapatawpha County, as was described in *Intruder in the Dust*, "the very economy of the land itself was founed¹" on negroes. And there was a kind of understanding between the whites and negroes. It was not that the former hated the latter. Being asked, the whites would probably have said that they liked the negroes even better than some white people they knew and they would have believed it. They knew that the negroes were probably constantly cheating them a few cents here and there in their store and probably even picking up things under their coats and aprons; they even gave them things free of charge — the bones and spoiled meat out of their butcher's icebox and spoiled candy and lard. All they required was that they acted like *niggers*. So, if a negro shot a white man, white people would take him out and burn him, all regular and in order and themselves acting exactly as they were convinced the dark criminal would wish them to act; "like white folks; both of them observing implicitly the rules: the nigger acting like a nigger and the white folks acting like white folke and no real hard feelings on either side." (p. 38) and these people were those who contributed cash money toward the criminal's funeral and the support of his widow and children if he had them. In short, negroes were not men in the sense whites were.² Therefore, of a negro with Lucas Beauchamp's attitude every white man in that whole section of the country thought, "We got to make him be a nigger first. He's got to admit he's a nigger. Then maybe we will accept him as he seem to intend to be accepted." (p. 15)

The negroes, in their turn, were incapable of freeing themselves.

Even "that unmistakable odor of Negroes" was perhaps "really not the odor of a race nor even actually of poverty but perhaps of a condition; an idea: a belief: an acceptance, a passive acceptance by them themselves of the idea that being Negroes they were not supposed to have facilities to wash properly or often or even to wash bathe often even without the facilities to do it with; that in fact it was a little to be preferred that they did not." (p. 11)

When the report of Lucas' murder got around, all the negroes shut themselves in and waited "not in anger and not quite in fear." (p. 74)

Two negro convicts, who were taken to Caledonia Church to dig Vinson Gowrie's grave to prove Lucas' innocence, were frightened at the appearance of Nab Gowrie and his twin sons and cut such comical figures as the readers would not easily forget.

Under such circumstances there were no men who would protect a negro murderer.³ The jailer, who had a wife and two children, knew too well to get himself "killed protecting a goddamn stinking nigger." (p. 43) He even said that it would have been better "for everybody if them folks had took him [Lucas] as soon as they laid hands on him yesterday —" (p. 43)

II

Lucas had his old master's blood in him. His face was pigmented like a negro's but his nose was high in the bridge and even hooked a little. He carried himself erect and his facial expression showed no consciousness of the color of his skin; it was "not arrogant at all and not even scornful: just intolerant inflexible and composed." (p. 12) He declined to accept the ways of dressing of Negroes and was "always in the worn brushed obviously once-expensive black broadcloth suit of the portrait-photograph on the gold easel and the raked fine hat and the boiled white shirt of his own grandfather's time and the tieless collar and the heavy watch-chain and the gold toothpick like the one his own grandfather had carried in his upper vest pocket." (p. 20)

He paid tax on his little house and ten acres of land regularly and had never been in trouble. But he seldom said "mister" to white people, and even when he said it, not as if he had meant it. When he was once provoked by a white man he "didn't move, quite calm, not even scornful, not even contemptuous, not even very alert - - - just watching." (p. 17) And when he was brought to the prison, where there were already many men gathered threatening to lynch him, his face did not even look at the people "but just toward them, arrogant and calm and with no more defiance in it than fear: detached, impersonal, almost musing, intractable and composed." (p. 35) And in the prison he kept "stern and inflexible pride." (p. 50)

A revealing scene — a climax — is where "Lucas was caught within two minutes after the shot, standing over the body with a recently-fired pistol in his pocket." (p. 62) Lucas had not shot and he could have defended himself but he did not. And there was a danger of lynching present, too. But he only kept silent. Probably this was partly because of his pride and his contempt of the trick and ignorance on the part of the whites but partly this was because of his resignation that any explanation or defence would be in vain. This latter cause was what made him keep back the truth even from Gavin Stevens, the lawyer whom he had specially sent for.

However, with all his pride, Lucas was poor and illiterate. He talked to Charles Mallison, Jr. exactly as his grandfather himself might but the words and grammar were different. It was the same with the gold watch-chain and toothpick that he carried about. They were the same as those worn by Charles' grandfather but Lucas carried the former even across the bib of his overalls.

The last scene is revealing on this point. Lucas insisted on paying for Stevens' work, but he could barely pay two dollars. His pride, ignorance, and incapability are seen here. — He was able to pay off the fee because the lawyer made it only nominal. But Lucas had expected even less than that and after the payment he asked for a receipt!

III

The first glimpse of Lucas that Charles had was out of a frozen creek in which he had fallen when he went shooting rabbits at Carothers Edmonds' at the age of twelve. At this awkward and humiliating moment Charles noticed that Lucas' expression "had no pigment at all, not even scornful: just intractable and composed." (p. 7) Lucas told Charles and his negro playfellows to come to his house but he did not speak "even back over his shoulder, already walking, not even waiting to see if they heard, let alone going to obey." (p. 8) Charles tried to pay Lucas for the food he was served, the food which Charles imagined Lucas was going to eat and therefore he had to do without, but was flatly declined. Charles flung down the money on the bare floor but had to take it back; Lucas made the two negro companions pick it up and put it into Charles' hand. And here Charles, in frantic "shame and anguish" began to long for "re-equalization, re-affirmation of his masculinity and his white blood." (p. 21) He was not especially prejudiced against colored people, rather less so than the average as could be seen in his association with Aleck Sander, although this boy was his mail's son and was obedient to him. But he yearned that Lucas "would just be a nigger first, just for one second, one little infinitesimal second." (p. 18) He managed to save money to buy and send a dress to Molly, Lucas' wife, and "at last he had something like ease because the rage was gone and all he could not forget was the grief and the shame." (p. 19) However, a gallon bucket of molasses was sent to him from Lucas in return and he felt that they "were right back where they had started; it was all to do over again; it was even worse this time because this time Lucas had commanded a white hand to pick up his money and give it back to him." (p. 19) Thus Lucas "obsessed his life working and sleeping too" for three years, and when, one late January afternoon, after the passage of those three years, he saw Lucas coming toward him and looking straight into his eyes, and yet not recognize

him, he thought, "He didn't even fail to remember me this time. He didn't even know me. He hasn't even bothered to forget me," and even in a sort of peace, "It's over. That was all because I am free." Yet, Lucas had not forgotten Charles, for in his last extremity after his arrest, he spotted Charles among the crowd that had gathered before the prison and asked him to get his uncle Stevens for him. But even then, on the same night, when he went back to the jail again alone he felt that Lucas had not only beat him, he had never had for one second any doubt of it.

IV

Lucas is not a heroic hero. With all his pride, he would not have saved himself without the thoughtfulness and sacrifice in others, besides the law represented by the constable and especially the sheriff, who was dutiful, determined and stern to the mob but kind to Lucas. Sympathy and assistance came from women and children, those who were "not concerned with probability, with evidence," (p. 69) those who had not had to be men too long, busy too long. The women were Miss Habersham and Charles' mother who went to help Miss Habersham to guard the door of the prison against the mob, especially the former. Miss Habersham, though she was "a kinless spinster of seventy" (p.59) was tougher than lawyer Stevens and Charles put together, with the characteristic sympathy for negroes which she had cultivated ever since her babyhood.⁵ And with her toughness she prevailed against the Gowries and the whole mob of Yoknapatawpha County who jammed the Jefferson square. Lawyer Stevens reflected that it "took an old woman and two children for that, to believe truth for no other reason than that it was truth, told by an old man in a fix deserving pity and belief, to someone capable of the pity even when none of them really believed him." (p. 97) The author also let Ephraim, an old negro, speak thus: "If you got something outside the common run that's got to be done and cant wait, dont waste your time on the men folks: they works on what your uncle

calls the rules and the cases. Get the womens and childrens at it; they works on the circumstances." (p. 86)

This is suggestive. Faulkner seems to think that in this complicated matter of discrimination that has been argued so long the solution is to be found more in emotion and intuitive understanding than reasoning.

V

Intruder in the Dust is fundamentally a problem novel dealing with negro segregation in the South.⁷ Against the backround of Jefferson and Beat Four Lucas Beauchamp was created, a negro "solitary kinless and intractable, apparently not only without friends even in his own race but proud of it". (p. 19) And Lucas was put in the worst situation that could happen to a negro in Yoknapatawpha County, that of having shot one of the Gowries in the back. He was set free by the courage of an old woman, good will of a boy, and assistance of a lawyer. The whites were put to shame. But the last scene suggests that there still is a long distance to go in educating those underprivileged people.

In plot this is a story of a boy who was obsessed by the idea of beating a negro who acted to him overbearingly and who was initiated to the world as he helped to save this negro. This is the reason why thirty-three pages were inserted immediately after the first two introductory paragraphs in order to explain the psychology of this boy toward Lucas during the four yeas from the time of their first meeting to the day Lucas was brought to the prison.

When Charles was asked by Lucas to dig up the grave to prove his innocence, he responded with a boy's willingness. He wondered if he would be able to do the work in time but he did not hesitate because he was asked by a negro. The story of digging up the grave twice and finding it containing an unexpected corpse the first time and empty the second time is of the nature of a detective story. So, here is another plot. And this and the other plot became intermingled.

VI

What strikes the reader of this novel is the slowness of tempo compared with other works published up to this time. The whole story, excepting the first twenty-two pages, covers only three days, from Saturday (May 7) through Monday, and there is much detailed description and explanation. This novel is more objective in the author's attitude of writing than *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and there is naturally more room for description than in the works just mentioned, which were written about twenty years before when the author was more fertile in creation, but this is unusual.

In one instance Miss Habersham's family background is explained in detail, and in such scenes as digging the grave and going with the mob the author seems to take interest in describing minutely in the Faulknerian way.

One point that Faulkner took special interest in is the detailed report of the subtle changes that happened in Charles' psychology. He tried to explain minutely subtle mental reactions, but he did not always succeed in this. The author who did so admirably well in this in *The Sound and the Fury* by means of reflecting "the stream of consciousness" relied too heavily on explanation in this case. Sometimes slow tempo suits the atmosphere of the scene but other times creeping description is tedious. The author tried to express in the style that was for him the best and only one. And occasionally he is seen in anguish in this effort and this is when he appeals to the reader, but too often what he has written shows his mannerism only. For instance, the omission of punctuation marks in this work is not a success, generally speaking.

VII

The value of a literary work, according to Faulkner, is in ratio to the anguish the author had in its creation. And what

attracts readers to Faulkner's works in the late 1920's and '30's — which contain every kind of vice and violence and many readers cannot understand why a writer has to deal with those dark sides only and nothing but those — is the feeling of anguish that is felt among the characters — all too human — and in the expression. The anguish experienced by the characters is not so much of moral nature as of human instincts, and more especially love and sex. That is the anguish Candace had for taking a glimpse of her baby Quentin, the anguish with which pregnant Dewey Dell watched Dr. Peabody, and the anguish that Joe Christmas and impotent Popeye had. This is a feeling or urge that is inborn and what human beings, when placed under such circumstances, cannot get away from easily.

In *Intruder in the Dust* anguish was felt by Charles and Lucas and to a certain extent by Crawford Gowrie. Charles' anguish, however, disappeared in the middle and it was not of a deep nature—merely pride. Lucas' anguish could have been great but this was partly a matter of pride, too. And if he had much anguish, it was not described or suggested. In the last scene he almost cut a comical figure. Instead of anguish there looms the spirit of justice: defence for the underprivileged race and exposure of a prejudiced Southern county. A few heroic characters come out on the stage and take part in a detective story like dénouement.

The readers who were attracted by the early works may be disappointed in this. Irving Howe is one of them and he asked if Faulkner had been distracted from his deepest interests by the buzz of controversy.¹¹ There is no doubt that Faulkner has been gradually becoming ideological. And he would not care much if he is criticized for this. His belief is that when there is something important to say, it is better to say it in a clumsy way than not at all.¹²

Faulkner's view of literature is undergoing a change. He may be disappointed in the readers who do not appraise this work highly, but the Faulkner lovers who are attracted by *The Sound and the Fury* may well be contented with the fact that Faulkner still thinks that this

is the work "to which he feels most tender."¹³ in other words, the best work.

In spite of extremely effective passages found here and there, *Intruder in the Dust*, as a whole, is not a success. The material is not digested enough in the writer. Faulker's explanation of exposure for the sake of social improvement applies to this work, too, perhaps the most typical one.

NOTES

- 1 W. Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (The New American Library, 1949), p. 75. Quotations from this work will be shown hereinafter by the page number in parentheses attached immediately after the quotation.
- 2 See the following words by Miss Habersham: "Of course. Naturally he [Lucas] couldn't tell your uncle. He's a Negro and your uncle's a man." (p. 69)
- 3 See p. 32 of the text.
- 4 Lucas said, "They turned out good this year. When I was making um I remembered how a boy's always got a sweet tooth for good molasses:" (p. 20)
- 5 Miss Habersham and Molly were born in the same week and brought up together, suckling at Molly's mother's breast, and they lived together, even slept in the same room almost till Molly and Lucas were married. Now Miss Habersham is living in a columned colonial house on the edge of town which has not been painted since her father died and has neither water nor electricity in it, with Negro servants.
- 6 The Gowries knew that Lucas was not the murderer. See: "The Gowries themselves had known he [Lucas] hadn't done it so they were just marking time waiting for somebody else, maybe Jefferson to drag him out into the street. . ." (p. 167)
- 7 The fact that Faulkner is deeply interested in this matter may be

seen in one of the chapters of his forthcoming book to be called *The American Dream*, which was read by the author at Nagano (Japan) Seminar in American Literature, on Aug. 12, 1955.

On the following evening, in answer to a question asked by a young woman as to the work which a Faulkner reader should take up first, he named, after a moment's pause, this work. Apparently this was because of his interest in the matter of negro segregation at the moment especially, not because this book was easiest to read for a foreign reader of Faulkner's works.

8 The region called "Beat Four" which was not simply inhabited or merely corrupted but translated and transmogrified by the Gowrie "race" or "species" is described as follows: "that whole region of lonely pine hills dotted meagrely with small tilted farms and peripatetic sawmills and contraband whiskey-kettles where peace officers from town didn't even go unless they were sent for and strange white men didn't wander far from the highway after dark and no Negro at any time—where as a local wit said once the only stranger ever to enter with impunity was God and He only by daylight and on Sunday—into a synonym for independence and violence." (pp. 28-29)

9 This novel is written in the objective third person style but the writer is always with Charles, and so the angle is only one.

10 See pp. 59 f.

11 Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (Random House (1952)), p. 194.

12 Faulkner's answer to a question at Nagano Seminar in American Literature, on Aug. 13, 1955. This was a meeting with a group of Nagano citizens.

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