WHITE WRITERS, BLACK RIGHTS: FRAMING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

by

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(Under the Direction of Hugh Ruppersburg)

ABSTRACT

In writing about the South, authors created a variety of works that examined or portrayed the social, historic, and cultural aspects of the region. Although many dealt pointedly with race relations, it is rarely a point of study to see how those writers responded in their texts to the rising tension and inevitable confrontations between blacks and whites that took place during the Civil Rights Movement. With so much change happening in their own “backyards,” Southern writers would have had interesting insight into the reasons and ramifications of the movement’s success. Considering the works of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, in particular, this thesis looks at how two of the South’s most celebrated and culturally astute writers framed the quest for black rights in the mid-twentieth century.

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B.A., University of South Carolina, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2008
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DEDICATION

For the activists, thinkers, and ordinary citizens who made the sacrifices that made the Movement which made all of this possible for me. This thesis bears you in mind.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special appreciation is extended to Hugh Ruppersburg who diligently and patiently read the early drafts of this thesis. Thanks for asking the necessary questions to make it complete while offering advice to make it clear. Thanks to Barbara McCaskill, as well, who urged me to research a topic that combined all of my interests. I am grateful for the opportunity given to me this year to submerge myself in re-discovering the Civil Rights Movement. My gratitude also extends to R. Baxter Miller for his encouragement to tie up the loose ends and explicitly say what was already in my head. I am indebted to each of these scholars and advisors.
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Standing at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered one of the most powerful speeches of the American Civil Rights Movement and of American history. Addressing the crowd of 250,000 social activists and ordinary citizens gathered in the capitol for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Dr. King began his famous “I Have A Dream” speech with a message rooted in metaphors combining economics with equality, debt with the duty to mobilize, and payment with progress. Dr. King summed up the march’s and movement’s purposes early in his speech, saying:

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, Black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.”

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. […] We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. (535-536)

History has shown that Dr. King’s words that day awoke a nation and eloquently managed to delineate and contextualize a movement already in the making. Speaking of a debt that was at once historical and figurative, Dr. King’s words drew upon the idea that black Americans were owed something by the nation at large because of their heritage of slavery and oppression. His
speech doesn’t, however, say those debts are strictly monetary. Rather King suggests that the “integrated check is fiducial both morally and financially,” according to rhetorician Mark Vail, whose essay “The ‘Integrative’ Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have A Dream’ Speech” examines the famed oration (68). Cashable at the figurative “bank of justice” for amounts written on the accounts of the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, there is no legal tender that can be drawn out for payment. However, by bringing in the idea that America has a debt of freedom and security as well as a promise of equality to its black citizens, there is also the implication of the financial debts owed as well. At the end of the Civil War, the plan was for reparations—a literal forty acres and a mule. That literal debt was never paid to every black American, and up until Dr. King spoke, neither had the figurative promises of the black man’s (and woman’s) equality been delivered.

Following his use of the promissory note/check metaphor, Dr. King adds that activists for social change were not just in Washington, D.C., but in the Mississippi Delta, the midlands of South Carolina, the red hills of Georgia, and every other “village and hamlet” in the South. Their goal: to “remind America of the fierce urgency of now” (536). To King, 1963 was the moment the debts needed to be settled. For those agitating and advocating for social change, 1963 was the time to cash in on the centuries’ worth of promises made and owed regarding social rights. In his speech, King tied the movement to balances due and, as Vail suggests, manages to inform everyone that “the divinely ordained issue of social justice comes to represent economic justice” as well (64).

Curiously, as stirring as Dr. King’s speech was, it was not the first text (nor the last) to put the Civil Rights Movement and the move for social justice in the framework of a debt unsettled. Lively as his metaphors were, Dr. King followed others who suggested that the
movement was a means to procure proper payment; it was an activism to settle accounts and a
call that would use the great American metaphor of capitalism and finance to convey that
message. In their most overt dealings with the race issue in their texts, Southern writers explored
these connections. In the novel *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), author William Faulkner constructs a
tale about a young white man and the lessons of race he’s taught by his attempt to “pay” an older
black man for his hospitality. On the surface, the story appears to be about black-white power
relations and one young man’s coming of age, but to look at the metaphor extended in the story
by Faulkner’s symbolism and use of coinage is to see indebtedness directly linked to the call for
equal rights and activism for black Southerners. Similarly, in her more explicit piece about the
“mess” the Civil Rights Movement was causing in the South, Flannery O’Connor employs
coinage and debt imagery to comment on the advances of black rights. In her short story
“Everything That Rises Must Converge” (1961), O’Connor’s white protagonist is struck down
by a black woman whose son she offered a penny and whom she has just shared an integrated
bus with. The violent assault on the white character in the face of money, the power and the past
it symbolized, creates a daring exploration of white guilt/privilege and juxtaposes debt, payment
and equality in a context of the movement itself.

There is plenty that can be said, and has been said, about how white writers construct
race, race relations, and black-white interactions particularly on Southern soil. There has been
less said on how those white writers take on the black rights movement in particular. As scholars
consider how the stories of the Civil Rights Movement have been constructed and disseminated,
often with the result that they have been oversimplified or removed from context, it is valuable to
reconsider how the texts that would have introduced, explored and grappled with the movement
attempted to frame it for greater debate. Particularly interesting is how the writers of the South
treated the change that was going on in their homeland as it was taking place. This thesis attempts to extend that exploration a few degrees by using two of the South’s most iconic writers and their most notably black rights-centered texts.

It is important to note a distinction this thesis makes in its examination of the Civil Rights Movement in Southern literature. While most sources consider the movement as distinct confrontations and events that took place in the period from 1955 to 1972—from roughly the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott through the Black Power Movement and start of the Black Arts Movement—the concepts and the groundwork of the movement pre-date the widely accepted historic moment. As with all social change, the idea and impulses for redress can be traced to long before mass movements occur. Following this understanding, in the context of this thesis, the movement of black Americans for social and civil rights is viewed from a time period beginning in the 1930s and moving forward through the 1960s.
CHAPTER 1
COINS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

William Faulkner has long been considered the bard of the South. His works reveal the nuance of class and culture, the influence of history and regionalism, and the intricacies of the everyday Southerner. Faulkner’s novel *Intruder in the Dust* is no different in these regards. Part detective fiction and part coming of age story, the work manages to provide an entertaining plot with solid commentary about life in the South. Rightly considered by critics to be Faulkner’s most direct comment on race relations, *Intruder in the Dust* goes beyond merely portraying the historically complex interactions of blacks and whites to providing, in literary form, a dissection of the collective psyches and social norms that converge around such black-to-white/white-to-black exchanges. In constructing the novel, first published in September 1948, Faulkner places characters familiar to his fictional Yoknapatawpha County in negotiations that voice the imminent issues of black American equality present in the decade. These issues were destined not only to echo but erupt in the 1950s and 1960s when the American Civil Rights Movement took more solid shape.

As characters Lucas Beauchamp, Charles “Chick” Mallison, and Gavin Stevens confront mob justice and work to save Beauchamp’s life, the issue of social justice for blacks is examined. Although parts of *Intruder in the Dust* devolve into gradualist rhetoric with regards to blacks gaining civil rights, the book’s imagery of coinage and themes of debt, repayment and growth fictionalize questions that undoubtedly haunted conversations about what white Southerners would make of their black neighbors’ demand for equality in the mid-twentieth century.
Questions such as “When will the debts associated with slavery and Jim Crow be collected?” “Who shall instigate the (re)imbursement?” and “How will those debts be paid?” arise from reading *Intruder in the Dust* with an interest in understanding what the work said about the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. In employing the images and themes, Faulkner creates a framework that links black rights with balances due and positions that indebtedness as central to the move for civil rights.

Examining *Intruder in the Dust* as commentary on the budding Civil Rights Movement requires the novel first to be formally located in the period that preceded the litigation, mass action protests and demonstrations widely considered to be the trademark of the American Civil Rights Movement. During the time Faulkner would have been conceiving and writing the novel, the country was already undergoing change and grappling with how to reconfigure where black Americans stood as Americans. In the early years of the century, “the New Deal and [Franklin] Roosevelt’s foreign policy rhetoric had roused expectations of change among African-Americans but left them unsatisfied,” according to Sean Dennis Cashman’s chronicle *African-Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights, 1900-1990* (72). Thus, by World War II (1941-1945), black Americans were not only watching the United States take a global platform for democracy and equality but were waiting for those ideals to trickle down to their lives as well. Cashman contends that by the time of American involvement in the second World War, “the African-American press called for a ‘Double V’ campaign, a victory against racism at home as well as over fascism abroad. Without the domestic victory, they reasoned, the military victory would be pointless” (80). Following the war—in politics, the military, housing, employment and beyond—the call for black rights and redress of black grievances was gaining a national voice. Given migration patterns of blacks from the rural South to the urban North and white Americans
moving to the suburbs, among other demographic changes, as well as the emergence of television, Cashman concludes that “race relations began to occupy a commanding position upon the political stage of postwar America” (89). Wielding greater political power because of population concentrations, toward the end of the 1940s blacks made small but significant gains in pursuing their rights. In 1946, President Harry Truman appointed his Commission on Civil Rights. He didn’t stop there. MaryAnn Dadisman explains in her article “Still Segregated: The Legacy of Brown,” that “[f]aced with mounting pressure from civil rights advocates, President Harry S. Truman issued executive orders in [July] 1948 addressing discrimination in the armed services, government employment, and in granting defense contracts. That same year, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that racially-restrictive real estate transactions were illegal” (Dadisman 12). Appearing in September of that year, Intruder in the Dust is solidly situated within the national discussion over the full rights of black Americans and where or how they would fit into American society.

If the year 1948 and the years prior indicate “a dramatic change in attitude toward race issues” in the country (Dadisman 12), in recent years scholarship has gone far to correct the attitude toward the Civil Rights Movement and its timeline. Despite the popular notions, the quest for social rights for black Americans didn’t begin in 1954 with the landmark Supreme Court decision in the school desegregation case of Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. Nor did it arrive in 1955, the year of the successful, but no less significant, Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. Scholars such as Kevin Boyle place the modern movement’s beginnings earlier in the century. Boyle writes in his “Labour, the Left and the Long Civil Rights Movement that, “[a]ccording to the new narrative line, the ‘long civil rights movement’ began in the 1930s, when African Americans joined with white radicals in the
surging labour movement” (Boyle 367). For Boyle and others who study the politics of employment, the Civil Rights Movement was “an extraordinarily expansive movement that linked the battle against Jim Crow to a thorough-going critique of economic injustice” (Boyle 367).

Other scholars lengthen the timeline in order to recognize and reclaim the foundations and early successes of the movement. Expanding the dates of the movement reduces condensing, “distort[ing] and suppress[ing]” much of the movement’s real history, writes Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (1233). In her article, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” Hall asserts there is a “truer story—the story of a ‘long civil rights movement’ that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, was intimately tied to the ‘rise and fall of the New Deal Order,’ accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a ‘movement of movements’ that ‘def[ies] any narrative of collapse’” (1235). It is during this early period of “acceleration” following World War II that Faulkner is writing and, no doubt, responding. Although the action of *Intruder in the Dust* could have taken place in any of the years prior, Faulkner would have felt the waves of the movement long before they were classified as a “movement.”

Noel Polk, in “Man In The Middle: Faulkner and the Southern White Moderate,” agrees that Faulkner felt the motion toward social change and thus positioned his text as an interpretation or representation of the events around him. Polk explains that Faulkner was writing *Intruder in the Dust* during the “winter and early spring of 1948, seasons during which the Mississippi Democratic party geared itself for a vital confrontation with the National Democratic party at the summer convention in Philadelphia, over the report of President Truman’s Commission on Civil Rights” (Gresset 167). The conventions would create the infamous
Dixiecrat split in the party concerning the platform of racial equality and would demonstrate the split ideologies concerning black rights present among politicians as well as ordinary citizens. Polk adds that the “political and emotional issues at stake in this Dixiecrat year—states’ rights, anti-lynching laws, mongrelization, the future of the white race, and other associated issues—were surely not lost on William Faulkner as he wrote *Intruder* in the spring and then saw it through press during the summer” (Gresset 168). Polk cites *New Yorker* reviewer Edmund Wilson who suggested soon after the novel’s publication that it was “partly…stimulated by the crisis at the time of the war in relations between Negroes and whites and by the recently proposed legislation for guaranteeing Negro rights” (quoted in Gresset 168). If, then, Faulkner is responding to the civil rights “crisis” of his time, the nature of that response is an alert to his readers of the inner motivations and insights of both black and whites who felt they had some stake in the outcome. Encoded in the text of *Intruder in the Dust*, of course, are the deeper comments about the debts whites feel they owe blacks and blacks feel they are owed by whites, and how those claims will shape the movement for civil rights.

The plot of *Intruder in the Dust* appears innocuous enough. As detective fiction it has the familiar formula: A man is wrongfully accused of murder, he enlists the assistance of someone to help prove his innocence, and after a series of daring acts or startling revelations the man is vindicated. Formulaic or not, Faulkner manages to do much more than just solve a case in his novel. He manages to contextualize a movement. From the outset of *Intruder in the Dust*, readers learn there has been a murder, but not just any murder: a Gowrie has been killed. This homicide is not only an atypical occurrence as to its victim but also as to its location and its execution. The Gowrie has been shot dead and not just anywhere and in any way nor by anyone, but in “Yoknapatawpha County […] the wrong place for a nigger to shoot a white man in the back”
The novel opens with the white residents coming to grips with what the murder means. For the residents, who later wait for Lucas Beauchamp, the black man accused of the murder, to show up at the jail, there is disbelief. The white residents are appalled at the audacity of this black man—who should know his place but obviously doesn’t—who has shot a white man dead in the back. The general reaction isn’t quite a sense of outrage, even as there is talk of lynch-mob justice, as much as it is a shock tinged with retribution that any black man would behave in such a way.

The main character Charles “Chick” Mallison, who has been in the crowd at the jailhouse, points out this fact. Chick, just a teenager, comes home and discusses with his family what has been taking place—a mob is gathering and waiting for the family of victim Vinson Gowrie to show up and lead them in lynching Lucas. Seated at his family’s dining table, with a black maid and her son within earshot, Chick proclaims, “They’re going to make a nigger out of him once in his life, anyway” (Faulkner 32). It is with this declaration, one often repeated in the novel, that the central problem with Lucas Beauchamp is illuminated. Lucas’s biggest infraction is not that he has killed a man, but that he has previously been acting as if he himself were a man. He has carried himself with pride and dignity and expected those whites in the town to treat him in similar fashion. He has not, in short, acted like a “nigger.”

In the novel, Beauchamp is described as a man who “neither protested or acquiesced;” he owned a hat like a fairly expensive one Chick’s own grandfather owned. Lucas had a gold toothpick just like Chick’s grandfather as well (Faulkner 13). Beauchamp carried himself differently, too, acting “not black nor white either, not arrogant at all and not even scornful: just intolerant, inflexible and composed” (Faulkner 13). Lucas is a man who has inherited a farm on ten acres of land from his white first cousin—land he was proud to own and unashamed to have
inherited. Faulkner characterizes Lucas, who appears in several of his novels, as a man who unabashedly carries himself proudly. Lucas displays that pride in ways that leave white men unsettled at his brazen, yet somehow subdued, audacity. They are quickened to wrath by this quiet, unapologetic dignity. Given this disposition, Lucas’s crime, even before he allegedly kills Vinson Gowrie, is being a black man who didn’t know his “place”: to act as if he had no self-respect or human dignity that others should acknowledge.

The notion that black people, Lucas Beauchamp among them, should remain in submissive, subservient roles pervades the literary town as much as it does the literal South. Throughout the novel, characters express their concern about blacks acting “out” of their defined positions. Nearly everyone’s response to hearing about the mob waiting to lynch Lucas, and every reaction to his alleged commission of murder, is that he was getting what he deserved. White characters comment that Lucas “should have thought of” what he was doing before he did it. Yet even in their refrain they really seem to be saying that Lucas should have thought of who he was before he killed a white man. Chick’s uncle, Gavin Stevens, says it best when he describes what the grocer, Mr. Lilley, thinks of the murder. He tells Chick that even this white man, who “has nothing against what he calls niggers,” who, “if you ask him, he will probably tell you he likes them even better than some white folks,” has only a simple rule: subservience (Faulkner 48). Gavin Stevens explains that “all [Mr. Lilley] requires is that they act like niggers” (Faulkner 48). When the mob can finally get a legitimate violation from Lucas, they are ready to kill him for all of his past misdeeds.

The crucial scene of *Intruder in the Dust*, its plot, and its statement on civil rights begins when Chick, having gone hunting (it wouldn’t be too far a reach to say that Chick was in pursuit of his expected role as a white man in the South), loses his balance on a footlog on Lucas
Beauchamp’s property. Faulkner writes, “he didn’t know how it happened, something a girl might have been expected and even excused for doing but nobody else” (5). Yet, Chick, a 12-year-old boy who “had walked the top rail of a fence many a time twice that far” finds himself falling, watching as “the known familiar sunny winter earth was upside down” (5). When Chick manages to come up for air from the icy pond, it is Lucas Beauchamp who is there to help rescue him. The imagery Faulkner uses makes it necessary to pause here. It is interesting to consider why Chick, who had walked across logs and the top rails of fences before, would fall off one on Lucas’s property. That their first meeting would find Chick off balance and literally unable to “straddle” the footlog (i.e. fence) acts as a precursor to the sort of moral/personal dilemma that Chick will face with Lucas. Throughout the pair’s interaction, the order of Chick’s universe will be upset and certain things will be turned upside down. After his introduction to Lucas, the footholds of social decorum and societal structure will not be there, and neither will the social order remain the same.

Chick, freshly rescued from the lake, is told to follow Lucas to his home. Crossing the threshold, Chick “could smell that smell which he had accepted without question all his life as being the smell always of the places where people with any trace of Negro blood live” (Faulkner 9). From that point forward, Chick’s predispositions and internalized prejudices kick in. Much as the unquestioned “rules” made him believe “that all people named Mallison are Methodists,” he thought all blacks were supposed to act, eat and be treated in a certain way (Faulkner 9). Chick then uses his limited understanding of who Lucas is—just another Negro—to shape his actions. Jennifer Ritterhouse explains in her book Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race that the “racial etiquette” or the “racial script,” of the South would guide Chick in how he negotiated space with a black man. Stripped of his cold, wet
clothes, Chick is warmed by the fire, wrapped “like a cocoon” in a quilt Lucas’s wife Molly gave him (Faulkner 11), and finds himself “sitting drowsing a little” in the comforts of Lucas’s home (Faulkner 12). He is then offered a seat at the dining table where a plate has been placed for him. Sitting there “set in the bright sunny square of a southern window” he realizes that the black teens, Aleck Sander and “Edmonds’ ‘boy,’” who were hunting with him have already eaten and he is being fed separately (Faulkner 13). The text says that Chick “didn’t know how he knew it [that they had eaten] since there were no signs, traces, soiled plates to show it” (Faulkner 13). Faulkner as an author knows it, and in this scene taps into the social mores of the South and the depths of racial segregation.

The separation of black and white dining is considered one of the artifacts of the black-white divide embedded in Southern social codes. Ritterhouse writes that “the separation of blacks and whites at mealtime, however minimal or artificial, was among the most strictly enforced rules of racial etiquette in the antebellum period” (31). According to Ritterhouse, “taboos against eating and drinking with blacks remained strong in the postemancipation South and, for many white southerners, became deeply ingrained” (42). Those sorts of social proscriptions would still be there when Chick seats himself and feeds himself alone at Lucas’s table. With that solitary meal, just a few feet from his black host, Chick is put in a position to think subconsciously about the roles he is expected to play as a white man in the South among black people. Lucas, in some way, sets up that consideration of caste. So codified was separation and expected deference that both Chick and Lucas have to respond to the racial script. At that time racial etiquette kept “both black and white southerners in their places, which, at mealtime, were far apart” and so Chick and Lucas meet on a plane of separation that will create a seismic collision just a few pages beyond (emphasis Ritterhouse 43).
Chick, at first, seems all too willing to accept Lucas’s hospitality, to eat Lucas’s food at a table set just for him, but then, surprisingly, he insults Lucas. Dry and fed, albeit with “nigger food” (Faulkner 13), Chick reaches in his pocket for a “half-dollar” with the purpose of giving it to Lucas (Faulkner 14). Somewhere between the sidemeat and greens he’s been served, and the half-baked biscuits, too, Chick has concluded that it is not enough to accept the courtesies he has had extended to him. Instead he moves toward his host with the intent to, at best, pay and, at worst, demean him. By the time he reaches Lucas, having passed his gold-leafed portrait, he has plunged back in his pocket for a dime and two nickels to add to his remittance. Yet, instead of placing the money in his hands and saying “thanks,” Chick drops them to the floor after Lucas declines to accept them. Chick then demands that Lucas, a black man at least fifty years his senior, “Pick it up!” (Faulkner 16). Lucas, in cool reply, asks the black teenagers who have accompanied Chick to pick up and return the coins.

What transpires in the last pages of Chapter 2 is not only essential to the plot of the novel but also to the statement Faulkner begins to construct about black rights and the shift toward a push for those rights. In employing the coin-dropping scene, Faulkner weaves in facts that point toward the collective conscious that makes Chick act and react as he does. The same goes for Lucas. For Chick, he begins, it wasn’t merely feeling gracious that had caused him to want to pay for Lucas’s generosity and welcome. Embedded in his actions was the weight of the social order Chick had grown up in and that Chick was aware of, so much so that afterward, ten minutes later and then for the next four years he would be trying to tell himself that it was the food which had thrown him off. But he would know better; his initial error, misjudgment had been there all the time not even needing to be abetted by the smell of the house and the quilt in order to survive what had looked out […] from the man’s face. (Faulkner 14)
More succinctly, Chick knows “better” than to believe he was motivated to drop the coins because he was overwhelmed by the food or taken aback by the peculiar “comforts” of black life. What compelled him to “ris[e] at last and with the coin, the half-dollar already in his hand” was in part rooted in the social conventions that white men, or white people, were never guests of blacks and they were never equals (Faulkner 14). It is the notion of superiority that “survives” Lucas’s quiet, unflinching dignity—the sort of dignity that compels Chick to follow the black man to his home, past Edmonds’s property, merely because “like his [white] grandfather the man striding ahead of him was simply incapable of conceiving himself by a child contradicted and defied” (Faulkner 8). As much as Chick should want to fight, does try to fight, his feelings of superiority over Lucas, he ultimately can’t because true equality is foreign to him and adverse to everything he’s been taught, implicitly and explicitly, up to that point by his Southern white community. In cues from his family and the townspeople, Chick, like any youth, wouldn’t have been exempt as “adult white southerners tried, consciously and unconsciously, to teach both black and white children to ‘forget’ any possible alternatives to white supremacy” (Ritterhouse 9).

Chick’s struggle to accept Lucas as an equal, an acceptance that would allow the black man’s hospitality, is further made evident by what transpires between the dinner table and the fireside. Having stopped to look at the gilded portrait, Chick is provided an explanation of the photo by Lucas’s wife Molly. She explains to him how what he is seeing is a proud Lucas who has managed to make his wife look foreign and, to Chick, “intolerably wrong” by not letting her wear her signature headrag (Faulkner 14). It is only after Lucas defends himself, saying, unapologetically, “I didn’t want no field nigger picture in the house,” that Chick reaches in his pocket for more money (Faulkner 15). He ends up “scooping the dime and two nickels—all he
had—into [his] palm” (Faulkner 15). This encounter suggests that it is hearing Lucas’s rejection of the “field nigger” traits, or of not wanting to be associated with such traits, that causes Chick to pay him more than what he had intended. This increase of payment and the giving of all he had, could be read as Chick’s wanting literally to pay the debt associated with slavery (where the term “field nigger” originates) or to recall that he is among the descendants of slaves/inferiors and he should assert himself. In considering the first motivation, it could be construed that compelled by the subconscious connection between the headrag, the “field nigger” comment, and his mounting sense of gratitude, Chick is moved by the internalized remorse associated with Southern white guilt.

Scholars, in examining Southern history and the history of Southern race relations, have characterized the white response to blacks as one coded in indebtedness due to slavery. In his article “The Debts of History: Southern Honor, Affirmative Action, and Faulkner’s Intruder in the Dust,” Eric Dussere brings this point to bear by noting that “critics rightly point to the way that slavery acquires a central significance in Faulkner's fiction as the original ‘sin’ or ‘crime’ which must be expiated by contemporary white Southerners” (40). In Dussere’s view, the “Faulknerian attempt—perhaps any attempt—to describe history as a reservoir of sin inevitably depends on some notion of debt and, therefore, some hope for the possibility of repayment: sin, crime, guilt—all are ways of understanding the world in economic terms, in the language of debt” (41). He adds:

In describing slavery as a burden or bond, however, Faulkner draws upon a specific idea of debt—upon the notion of a "debt of honor" that dishonors Southerners as long as it remains undischarged and binds Southern blacks and whites forever through the immovable burden that rests on the whites: like the gambling debts of antebellum days, “the obligation had to be paid so that the relationship between the players could be
terminated.” This is the burden that confronts Faulkner’s white characters: the burden of being forever indebted to and thus bound to their black contemporaries [. . . ] (42)

Chick’s grabbing for money, then, is an attempt to make amends, of some sort, for the (mis)treatment of Lucas and men of Lucas’s race. Out of context it could be seen as noble, but scrutinized through the lens of history, there is something less magnanimous and more culturally resonant occurring. Misguided by his youth, or at least moved by his naiveté, Chick at first attempts an actual payment to Lucas in response to his feelings of inadequacy or indebtedness. Many older whites presumably would have insulted or avoided Lucas after they needed his help. Behaving in such a way as to make the black man feel socially beneath the white man might be the only way for whites to stay dominant and maintain their “superior” status.

While Chick attempts to insult Lucas in his second response by flinging the coins, his first action to search for them has to be critiqued. In paying Lucas, or any black man, Chick is also acting to get out from under the burden of slavery and not only be un-“bound,” as Dussere would name it, but regain the sense of balance that would give him back the upper hand in the black-white dynamic. If the debt of slavery and the debt of the meal are settled then white superiority is no longer threatened by white guilt. Chick, by paying Lucas, would not have to feel bad for accepting black hospitality or for needing it after falling off of a footlog he had crossed time and time again.

Faulkner complicates the payment scene by embedding Chick’s payment with shame. When Chick reaches to pay Lucas, the text notes that he digs deep to give everything he has in his pocket. What he pulls out is something even he isn’t satisfied with. Determined to put a price on Lucas and his generosity, and subsequently to put him in his “place,” Chick falls short. The seventy cents just are not enough. It is just as emasculating and belittling as having the black man “save” him from his folly at the creek as it is to only have seventy cents to buy Lucas’s
silence, reverence or gratitude. Faulkner describes the moment when Chick offers those coins as one of instant regret and inadequacy. After Chick “extended the coins: […] in the same second in which he knew she would have taken them he knew that only by that one irrevocable second was he forever now too late, forever beyond recall” (Faulkner 15). He was “too late” to take back his insult and he was “too late” to repay Lucas for having to endure what a proud black man or any black man endures. The reason Chick stands blushing and embarrassed “with his dumb hand open and on it the four shameful fragments of milled and minted dross” is because he realizes the debt owed to Lucas perhaps can’t be covered in metal, milled or minted (Faulkner 15).

In the end, it would be fair to say that Chick realizes his error, the sin of his pride even, but he has already put the coins out. Lucas doesn’t hesitate to scold him for it. Lucas asks, without even looking at the amount, what the money is for (Faulkner 15). He doesn’t need, or get, an answer. Lucas knows that Chick was attempting to strike down his inherent dignity when he offers to pay for services he would have taken gratis from a white man. When Lucas rejects the subordinate position and refuses to be associated with anything like a “field nigger” he rejects the idea that he is low on the social totem pole and therefore exempt from rights and respect. Simultaneously, what Lucas refuses in taking the coins is Chick’s sense of white privilege. Chick couldn’t see himself as less than a superior to a black man, much less an equal, or at least, he was trying to act out that role. This is made clearer by what he does with the coins. The only way he could not feel embarrassed or feel ashamed was to make Lucas, a man who walked and lived as if he were as tall or taller than any white man, stoop—literally. Chick then drops the coins expecting or needing or wanting Lucas to bend, to break his proud posture, and pick them up from the floor. In that stooped position, grappling for the minor reward, Lucas
would be transformed and returned back to the lowly, bowed stance that Chick had possibly
grown to believe was the “place” of blacks.

While Chick certainly intends to “reduce” Lucas by dropping the coins, Faulkner takes
care to convey that it is not an absolutely malicious act. Chick is no Grand Dragon of the Ku
Klux Klan or other racist extremist. Instead, he is the white moderate in training—a being so
conflicted about what to do with his black neighbor that he oscillates between upholding the
status quo and abhorring himself for it. Chick’s decision to drop the coins was as much reflex
having to do with embarrassment, inadequacy and assumed decorum as it was an attempt to
destroy Lucas entirely. Chick fantasizes that one day he’ll meet Lucas when they are both old
men, and the

half-century discrepancy between them would be as indistinguishable and uncountable as
that many sand grains in a coal pile [he could imagine] saying to Lucas: *I was the boy
who when you gave me half your dinner tried to pay you with some things which people
in those days called seventy cents’ worth of money and so all I could think of to save my
face was to fling it to the floor? Don’t you remember?* (italics Faulkner’s, 26)
In Chick’s coming maturity he can understand that flinging the coins was also an attempt to
protect his ego from having to face the paltry sum he has to offer Lucas. To cover up his lack of
funds, he resorts to demeaning Lucas because blackness in his time was considered lower than
white’s inability to pay. To shift the focus off of his own inadequacy and call attention to what
he figures must be Lucas’s, he ridicules blackness to divert attention from “failed” whiteness. If
Lucas could be made to bend to a younger white man, then perhaps, he wouldn’t look down on
the little boy who fell into the creek and had only seventy cents to regain his pride. Faulkner
further points out that Chick doesn’t maliciously fling the coins but releases them, “spurning
them downward” really, as if he holds them in contempt (Faulkner 15). Just as if he’d released a
hot pan held long enough to burn, Chick lets the coins go because they in some way injure him,
particularly his pride. At that moment, they are truly worthless (at least to Lucas) so he can’t bear to hold them anymore nor face what they symbolize. It is only as a sense of recovery for his pride and his social station that he commands a near pitiless Lucas to pick the coins up.

In yet another attempt to justify or even defend Chick, Faulkner cites a “once-frantic shame and anguish and need not for revenge, vengeance but simply for re-equalization, reaffirmation of his masculinity and his white blood” that compels Chick’s actions (Faulkner 26). In other words, Chick’s statement with the dropped coins can only be interpreted as an act to demonstrate his higher sense of position over Lucas, a black man who’d just served him “a slice of side meat and greens.” One doesn’t usually seek to be a guest of someone he’s better than, and Chick doesn’t want to be. In the case of white men and black men, where white men are supposed to hold the power and the rank, hospitality could come only from the top (read white) down and not the bottom up. Not getting the satisfaction of having Lucas submit to this position, Chick is determined to make Lucas admit his subservience. Dropping the coins is just one way to do that, but Lucas refuses. That Faulkner supplies at least three different reasons for why Chick drops the coins marks how significant and riddled with meaning the single act could be. That a seemingly simple gesture can have so many social justifications sheds light on why Chick would do it but also on why Lucas would blatantly reject it.

When Lucas refuses the seventy cents of payment, he does so in such a way that it puts him at odds with Chick. In a battle of wills, he commands Chick’s black companion Aleck Sander, and another black teen who’d accompanied them on the hunt to “[p]ick up his money” and “[g]ive it to him” (Faulkner 16). The boys readily comply, and before long Chick is holding the coins he spurned once more. Immediately after giving these orders, Lucas dismisses all of the boys, black and white, from his home, admonishing Chick, in particular, to “go on and shoot
your rabbit [...] and stay out of that creek” (Faulkner 16). In that moment Lucas reclaims his authority as a man, an authority even over a white citizen of Yoknapatawpha County, and exposes what was really at stake with the offer of the coins. The entire episode was an effort to subdue Lucas, to take away some of his sense of manhood or at least show that manhood as being of less substance than that of white men’s. From the exchange before the fire, however, Lucas demonstrated that he is a man of dignity, too, and thus not required to accept payment for a good deed any man, white or black, would extend to another. Lucas’s dignity, and sense of that dignity, simply would not allow him to take payment for hospitality.

In contrast, Chick’s sense of white privilege and Southern upbringing, which rests on the back of black subjection (as the townspeople prove), wouldn’t allow him to let a black man have such dignity or discretion. In Chick’s world, hospitality from a black man could not be hospitality because black men were supposed to have no social standing, nothing to give, and no dignity worth acknowledging. In fact, to the white adults Chick knew black dignity was not a viable concept. After he leaves Lucas’s house at Lucas’s command with the coins in his pocket again and the reminder of how he had girlishly fallen into the creek, Chick discovers in Lucas’s refusal to accept payment what “every white man in that whole section of the country had been thinking about him [Lucas] for years: 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 seems to intend to be accepted” (italics Faulkner’s, 18). What Lucas wants to be accepted as is a man, an equal. Chick’s confrontation with that assertion pits the two against one another and sets up the power struggle that ensues between them for the better part of the novel.

Chick can’t make sense of what went wrong between him and Lucas. In the spaces they both occupy, the world is turned upside down, much as it was on the footlog, when a white man
has to thank a black man. Things are topsy-turvy when black men have anything white men need and would ask for. By the fire that day when Chick should have been grateful for his rescue and the place to get warm and dry, he couldn’t say “thank you” just as many of his townspeople can’t acknowledge black dignity in other ways. It is hard for him to fathom a black man being man enough (or black people being people enough) to warrant such dignified treatment. In a scene later in the novel, Chick’s uncle, Gavin Stevens, interrupts his jailhouse interview with Lucas—by then his client—to interject his criticism of the black man accused of murdering a white man. In a moment when one would expect him to urge his client to tell the truth or not to worry, Stevens offers advice meant to remind Lucas of his “place.” With a serious tone he asks, “Lucas… has it ever occurred to you that if you just said mister to white people and said it like you meant it, you might not be sitting here now?” Sentiments like this echo the degree of deference the white men felt they were entitled to from a black person.

In tracing the use of courtesy titles, Ritterhouse notes that after Reconstruction “blacks won a more permanent victory in eliminating ‘Master’ from the South’s racial vocabulary […]” Within a few years after 1865, ‘Boss,’ and ‘Captain,’ as well as ‘Mister’ and ‘Sir,’ had replaced ‘Master’ (37). These terms were made the more “acceptable to whites because they marked a clear status distinction” (37). Chick shares a similar thought process with both his fictional uncle and the real life white Southerner he is supposed to represent. He has, to some extent, internalized the Southern white conception of blacks. When Chick first walks into the jail cell and sees Lucas lying on the mattress-less and pillow-less cot, he dismisses Lucas’s high self-perception. Locked in a solitary cell, accused of murder, and finally at the mercy of whites in the town, Chick surmises that Lucas is “just a nigger after all for all his high nose and his stiff neck and his gold watch-chain and refusing to mean mister to anybody even when he says it”
(Faulkner 58). The emphasis on Lucas’s refusal to say “mister” hearkens back to the historical script composed in slavery and postemancipation. In her examination of “racial etiquette,” Ritterhouse explains how white Southerners “jealously guarded the titles ‘Mr.,’ ‘Mrs.,’ and ‘Miss’ for white people” (45). Having a black man call another white man “Mister” recalled the subjection of slavery and by “demanding deference and using racial keywords to distance and subordinate blacks inscribed white southerners’ fundamental lesson of white supremacy” (Ritterhouse 18). Just as the term “nigger” and the idea of “acting like a nigger” were ways to restrict black dignity and movement, so was saying “Mister.”

The town’s expectations of and reactions to Lucas exemplify these notions. To be black in the South before the Civil Rights Movement, one must say “Mister” and mean it, but saying “Mister” goes beyond courtesy. A black person must accept his second-class citizenship and appear to enjoy it or not question it. Anything else is not an “option in a world where any black person who got ‘uppity,’ much less challenged the power structure, could get killed” (Ritterhouse 57). Lucas Beauchamp’s “stern and inflexible pride,” however, does not allow him to offer more than the perfunctory salutations and the entire town knows it (Faulkner 64). They hate him for it, are angered by it—as the white man’s outburst in Fraser’s store shows—and they can’t wait to teach him a lesson about what should prevail in the battle between black dignity and black deference. Such lessons manifest themselves in the cell-side comments from Gavin Stevens and Stevens’s explanation of what the grocer Lilley said. Yet even in the face of the lynch mob, Lucas is unmoved. He responds: “So I’m to commence now. I can start off by saying mister to the folks who drags me out of here and builds a fire under me” (Faulkner 62). Lucas, of course, has no intention of starting to call white men “Mister,” yet he is making light of the irony
of Gavin Steven’s suggestion that white (propensity for) violence could in any way be deterred by black action.

The truth behind Lucas’s reply to Gavin Stevens is that there certainly is no safety in being courteous. All the sincere “yes, Misters” won’t stop a mob from forming or from coming. Lucas Beauchamp, in a revolutionary act, decides not to play the game. By refusing to adhere to the racial script of saying “Mister,” he faces the certain death or other consequence afforded to blacks who thought themselves too dignified to follow the racial code. Keith Clark argues in “Man on the Margins: Lucas Beauchamp and the Limitations of Space” that

In *Intruder* Faulkner means for Lucas to be a Herculean black *everyman*. The “new” Lucas refuses to call whites “mister”; he refuses money from the Huck Finnish Charles (Chick) Mallison, whom Lucas clothed and fed after the boy had fallen in his pond; when falsely accused of killing a white man (Vinson Gowrie), he refuses to tell his lawyer—and Chick’s uncle—Gavin Stevens vital information because he sees that Stevens does not believe him; and finally, Lucas acts as his own attorney, engaging the services of both whites (Chick and Miss Eunice Habersham) and blacks (Aleck Sander, Chick’s boyhood companion) to exonerate himself. (73)

By becoming the black “everyman,” Lucas then comes to symbolize the struggle of all black Americans for their rights. Clark explains, “Lucas, as Faulkner intends him, represents the moral center of the text, for it is that complex dynamic of the South’s treatment of blacks which spawns the novel’s central action—the false but conceivable accusation that a black man killed a white one” (76). If Lucas is the moral center of the novel, then his treatment becomes the moral problem of the novel. Jailed falsely and facing mob justice as well as being treated with derision in public places, Lucas has to save himself simply because there is no system in place to save him. He is right to question Gavin Stevens about the good it would do to use courtesy titles in a world where a show of courtesy by black men wasn’t a guarantee of anything. Encased in this
larger context, the ills that plague Lucas plague all black Americans; therefore, the questions his character raises are the questions that need answering for all black Americans. The Civil Rights Movement was about creating a system of equality wherein black citizens were given access to the rights and privileges that all citizens were due. Lucas’s role in the novel serves to bring that out.

In exploring the quandary over black rights and how those rights will be recognized, *Intruder in the Dust* is at once explicit and understated. Faulkner, to a fault some say, makes his work a tract on the conflict between whether gradualism or revolution will improve the lot of black America. In portions of the book, long after Lucas has been vindicated, Faulkner interrupts his plot to have his character Gavin Stevens editorialize about the state of affairs surrounding the black rights. Using Stevens as a mouthpiece for what some real Southerners thought, Faulkner builds into his novel a gradualist platform that lifts the endurance of “Sambo,” i.e. the metaphorical, allegorical, and stereotypical black American, above the immediate cries for equal justice (Faulkner 149). Critics are apt to say that Faulkner’s use of the verbose and usually fallible Stevens is itself the author’s critique of the gradualist line of thinking. Noel Polk, in his article “Faulkner and the Southern White Moderate,” is one of those who felt the “need to take seriously Faulkner’s effort to distance himself from Stevens,” noting how “the novel itself insists that we be careful about Stevens’s opinions about race” (Gresset 170). In Polk’s argument, the fact that Stevens appears to be smoking a pipe (as in blowing smoke) throughout these comments, has to be seen as a sign of untrustworthiness. Polk uses for evidence how, in responding to his contemporary critics, Faulkner had been paraphrased as saying that Stevens was not speaking for the author, “but for the best type of liberal Southerners” (Gresset 168). For the purposes of understanding the novel’s commentary on civil rights framed by indebtedness, it
is not completely necessary (although it is interesting and not without merit) to know Faulkner’s personal feelings about gradualism. Authors often write what they believe just as often as they present what others believe. Instead of decoding whether Faulkner is Stevens or Steven is part Faulkner, it is just as necessary to consider how Faulkner contextualizes/characterizes in the novel the white Southern response to the idea of black rights.

Using Lucas as a catalyst Stevens tries to instruct his young white nephew on how to view the changes clamoring at the door of the South and the nation. In a multi-page digression Faulkner has his character ponder the philosophical and moral implications of civil rights before delving into the practical ones. Through the “voice” of Stevens, the text probes how white Southerners have to face the dilemma caused by “the postulate that Sambo [black Americans] is a human being living in a free country and hence must be free” (Faulkner 154). According to Stevens, the conflict between black and white in the South will be based on coming to terms with the claim that black men and women are human, and for that reason deserving of liberty as well as equality and autonomy. After all, if any black man is human, then he will have to be treated as human and with the dignity that humanity requires. There will inevitably come a time this statement posits, when black men and women will be seen as human and not just “niggers.” It is in realizing this that the change in black white relations will come about. Stevens continues his monologue by considering the situation of Lucas Beauchamp:

Someday Lucas Beauchamp can shoot a white man in the back with the same impunity to lynch-rope or gasoline as a white man; in time he will vote anywhent and anywhere a white man can and send his children to the same school anywhere a white man’s children go and travel anywhere the white man travels as the white man does it. (Faulkner 155) Besides beginning to endorse a gradualism (“someday”) that directly contradicts the activism many in the time were enacting and considering, Stevens links Lucas’s cause to that of other
blacks and the burgeoning struggle for civil rights. In 1948, the issues of voting rights, adequate schooling and public accommodation were just as pertinent as they were in the late 1950s through the 1960s. Stevens’s concern about the metaphorical Lucas and his ability to do things “anywhen” and “anywhere” points to the larger concern of the townspeople in the novel. It is not just Lucas at stake in this but all blacks. His demand for respect represents the calls for everyone’s social freedom. The day (no day soon, Stevens repeatedly adds) a black man will be considered the legal equal of a white man, entitled to judicial rights, voting rights, schooling rights and travel rights, is the day the country begins to redress the black condition.

Faulkner, of course, complicates the idea of black rights by inserting, via Gavin Stevens, the view that the impetus of change has to come from the white South itself. In the gradualist belief, it is the South that has “the privilege of setting him [Sambo] free” and not the black man or anyone else (154). Black rights, in that sense, cannot come from the demands of black Southerners or blacks across the country; it cannot come from the government or even integrationists in the North. In this view, black rights will come not when blacks are ready but when the South is ready. Commenting on the erroneous concept that forcing laws “based on the idea that man’s injustice to man can be abolished overnight by police,” Stevens says, “Sambo will suffer for it [federal intervention] of course; there are not enough of him yet to do anything else.” Stevens uses a double-sided logic that purports there can be no legislation of morality that will make whites treat blacks any differently, yet admits there is something that can be done when people complain about it. Who exactly will they be complaining to, if not the government? Stevens seems to suggest an innate understanding, acceptance even, that when there are enough black people united for the cause of civil rights—e.g. a movement—the group can stop being the “pawns” of the North and the beasts of burden in the South.
In a related point, also advocating a more ideological mass action, Stevens makes note that when there are a “few of others who believe that human life is valuable simply because it has a right to keep on breathing no matter what pigment…and are willing to defend that right at any price,” change can occur (Faulkner 244). He adds that “it doesn’t take many… and one can be enough and with enough ones willing to be more than grieved and shamed Lucas will no longer run the risk of needing without warning to be saved” (Faulkner 244). In this sense, Stevens is advocating for a mass of Southern whites to change their thinking and join the cause of black rights. While he puts the destiny of black rights into the hands of a benevolent white society—a society that has already proven with Lucas and others an unwillingness to recognize black humanity—Stevens’s sentiments still are linked to the belief during the American Civil Rights Movement that it would take a coalition of people, regardless of color, bent on change to impact society and secure the rights of black Americans.

At the same time Faulkner writes of gradualism, however, he does make several nods to the idea that mass action among black people might not only be required but is an increasing possibility. All the years after the Civil War and the amendments to the U.S. Constitution that guaranteed “equal rights” brought little change. According to Gavin Stevens, legal recourse is limited. He tells Chick that “only three short generations later [after the Civil War/Reconstruction] they are faced with the necessity of passing legislation to set Lucas Beauchamp free” once again (Faulkner 155). Referring to the Truman era policies that sought unsuccessfully to make lynching a federal crime and end poll taxes, Stevens’s sentiments are just as easily extended to those that culminated in the 1960s era’s Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts meant to dismantle Jim Crow policies. Cutting through the rhetoric, Stevens’s points raise concerns about what it really will take to make a change in the lives of blacks. If legislation
won’t work, then there must be some type of mass action or movement among the masses. Despite the fact that inaction of the black masses (not a single black character in town rallies for Lucas) is evident in the book, the injustice that Lucas faces demands such action. Although Aleck Sander, the black teen, goes with Chick to help dig up the Gowrie grave, his is the only black action on Lucas’s behalf. The absence of the concerned and united black masses in the novel shows what occurs when black rights are left to white actors: lynch mobs form and injustice is set to reign. If it had not been for Chick’s sense of indebtedness to Lucas and Miss Habersham’s family loyalty to Molly, the lynch mob would have gotten Lucas Beauchamp. He would have been another black man dead because he dared to live as a black man, and white society didn’t respect his right to life or dignity. What else but a movement or codified laws could thwart such dismissal? Similarly, without a movement based on black unity, black justice (in this case Lucas’s) is left at the mercy of white indebtedness and personal affinity.

Even in presenting the gradualist approach, in a very real sense, Faulkner saw that the next battle between blacks and whites would be entrenched in a struggle for one group to assert its individual dignity and the other to acknowledge it. Writing after World War II, when black soldiers were returning from abroad and expressing their discontent at dying and fighting for a country in which they could be only second-class citizens, Faulkner as a Southern man aware of Southern history doesn’t just make the discussion of civil rights a catalog of when the movement will occur and of issues it will address. Instead, and most interestingly, he interweaves the theme of indebtedness into the novel to illuminate the larger, less tangible historical and cultural forces that have set up the movement. According to the text and the major motifs of *Intruder in the Dust*, not only would the crisis over civil rights concern the quest for human dignity but they would encompass a reckoning of accounts owed (i.e. indebtedness).
In their introduction to the forty years of scholarly criticism collected in *Essays on William Faulkner’s Intruder in the Dust: A Gathering of Evidence*, editors Michel Gresset and Patrick Samway, S.J., offer evidence that Faulkner wanted the ideas of Southern race relations and the need for a civil rights movement to connect to the idea of debt, or outstanding balances. They include a letter from Faulkner that expresses as much in a few short lines:

As a change of pace and to renew his creative energies, Faulkner wrote [his agent Harold] Ober on February 1 [1948] that he had put aside writing *A Fable* and had already finished 60 pages of a draft of a short novel, what he called ‘a mystery-murder’ whose theme concerned a ‘relationship between Negro and white, specifically or rather the premise being that the white people in the south, [sic] before the North or the govt. or anyone else, owe and must pay a responsibility to the Negro. (ix-x)

Reading the novel, as Faulkner intended it to be read, must require a conscious assessment of the debt whites owe and how those debts can or cannot be paid. The note to Ober makes clear the states’ rights bent of Faulkner’s argument about civil rights. As he explores the idea that “white people in the south,” before anyone else, even the government, must be the ones to pay for the freedom of blacks, he ties in not just the message behind Gavin Stevens’s diatribes but the interaction between Chick and Lucas.

Gavin Stevens’s argument centers on the idea that the South has the “bill” when it comes to black rights. Southerners are the debtors and in his long-winded reasonings “Stevens says to the North,” writes Noel Polk, “let the South free the black man; we owe it to him and we will pay him and we don’t need anybody to interfere” (Gresset 170). The South, in this rationale, merely needs to recall that it has this debt to pay and pay it. If it doesn’t, Faulkner further seems to suggest, the reason for a civil rights movement will stem from the region’s prolonged inability to settle that debt. Stevens couches this analysis in an anecdote linking rights/redress to debts. He
explains to Chick, who has wondered why no white man apologized to Lucas—not even offering so much as a can of tobacco—after falsely accusing him of murder:

The can of tobacco? That would have been enough? Of course it wouldn’t. Which is one reason why Lucas will ultimately get his can of tobacco; they will insist on it, they will have to. He will receive installments on it for the rest of his life in this country whether he wants them or not and not just Lucas but Lucas: Sambo since what sets a man writhing sleepless in bed at night is not having injured his fellow so much as having been wrong. (Faulkner 199)

Stevens’s take on the weight of indebtedness is as usual a bit convoluted but the premise in this case is relatively easy to follow. Using Lucas as an example of all blacks (Sambo), he figures that it will be white guilt at having wronged Lucas—and thus having wronged black people through slavery, oppression and racism—that will compel whites to try again and again to repay him. What Stevens hints at, and the civil rights movement itself will address, is the notion of what is proper payment. Can a can of tobacco, or separate “but equal” schools, really be just compensation? What of open public accommodation and desegregated military service or housing? That the South won’t even care if the payment is sufficient but will insist on giving it to both the literal and metaphorical Lucas sets up the tension that dominates the “long civil rights movement.”

Stevens finishes the point by adding:

So Lucas will get his tobacco. He wont [sic] want it of course and he’ll try to resist it. But he’ll get it and so we shall watch right here in Yoknapatawpha County the ancient oriental relationship between the savior and the life he saved turned upside down: Lucas Beauchamp once the slave of any white man within range of whose notice he happened to come, now tyrant over the whole county’s conscience. (Faulkner 199)

These comments reveal what is really at stake with the Civil Rights Movement and the notion of Southern/white indebtedness: In the cyclical system of trying erroneously to repay the debt of
white guilt, blacks will be given power over the conscience of their white counterparts. Stevens, whether blowing smoke or not, might be on to something (Polk in Gresset, 170).

The exchange between Chick and Lucas before the fire illustrates how the interplay between civil rights, guilt and indebtedness works in the novel. Having tried to pay the personal debt of being rescued and fed, as well as the historical/cultural debt of a white man embarrassed by his actions toward a black man, Chick finds himself in a curious circumstance with Lucas. Forced to leave Lucas’s home with the seventy cents still in his pocket, his ego smarting from the encounter and his conscience guilty because of how he behaved, Chick sets into motion a power struggle between the two. From that point forward, the relationship between the two is based on Chick’s need to assert his dominance over Lucas on the one hand, and Lucas’s rejection of that domination on the other. To clarify: Chick had needed to be rescued and Lucas had offered a warm fire. Chick had not wanted to be fed but Lucas had a plate set for him. Chick had thought to offer the money but had instead chosen to insult Lucas, and Lucas had refused both the insult and the payment. The pattern set, and with the proverbial lines drawn in the sand (the coin drop being the measuring stick), the two embarked on a game of one-upmanship that progresses as each tries to raise the stakes.

Chick admits he wanted to make Lucas Beauchamp take a payment—with interest—by buying gifts and sending them to the older man who had not wanted his seventy cents. His goal was to find a way to make Lucas accept a payment Lucas didn’t think was appropriate or necessary. Chick uses all of his available money, buying first a gift package filled with “two-for-a-quarter cigars and tumbler of snuff for Molly,” before saving up his allowance to send an imitation silk dress to her as well (Faulkner 22). He figures he has settled the debt, and to such a high degree that he has bought Lucas’s forgiveness, compliance, or deference. However, in
reply, Lucas sends him back “a gallon bucket of fresh homemade sorghum molasses” (Faulkner 22). Once happy to have “merely discharged [...] the seventy cents,” Lucas’s in-kind payment of molasses throws things off for Chick. Instead of being in balance, or having gained the upper hand, “they were right back where they had started; it was all to do over again” (Faulkner 23). Except, as the text notes, “it was even worse this time” because Lucas had sent a white farm hand to deliver his gift, not even bothering to carry it himself” (Faulkner 23). For Chick, there was no way to respond to this latest gift because he would only be setting himself up “for Lucas again to command somebody to pick up and return” whatever it was Chick sent (Faulkner 23). He also didn’t have the proper horse to carry out any revenge or restitution with dignity (Faulkner 23). Chick is left with the debt still unpaid and the burning desire to get even, or economically speaking, “in the black,” with Lucas.

In the novel, Faulkner suggests that the obsession for this repayment comes from racially imposed concerns. Lucas had, by not accepting Chick’s offer of money, taken Chick’s “own seventy cents and beat him with them” (Faulkner 18). Lucas had refused the deeds of a white man, a refusal that was nearly unheard of, and Chick doesn’t know how to process that reaction. In the world of men like the Gowries and Mr. Lilley, black men did what white men told them to. Lucas’s stern refusal of all of Chick’s attempts at redress culturally emasculates Chick, or at least make him feel powerless. White men, in Chick’s time, got their power from being superior to black men. Lucas takes that away from Chick by not accepting the gifts and leaving it as that. Chick is left “impotent,” unable to do anything to rectify his debts or gain absolution from Lucas, a black man, because Lucas will not take his payment (Faulkner 18). The seventy cents, the cigars, the dress, all foreshadow the notion of the can of tobacco Gavin Stevens will mention. They represent, for Chick, a debt owed but unpayable, a debt still on the ledgers. In discovering
what “every white man in that whole section of the country had been thinking” for years (Faulkner 18), Chick is not just learning a lesson about the stubborn “biggity stiff-necked stinking burrheaded” Lucas but about the white man’s other burden: guilt (Faulkner 19). Lucas, in this sense, is a black man who will not let white men discard their conscience with the traditional black-white relations.

At once motivated and restricted by a personal and historic self-reproach, Chick can’t shake his bond to Lucas. He has become not just indebted but enamored with him. He finds himself “waiting and haunting” the town square, looking for a chance either to redeem himself or rebuke Lucas for their past interactions (Faulkner 25). All the while, the text says, Chick knows that “whatever would or could set him free was beyond not merely his reach but even his ken; he could only wait for it if it came and do without it if it didn’t” (Faulkner 23). In the meantime, what was left was the residual guilt; a guilt that wasn’t as much remorse as it was “the dead monstrous heatless disc which hung nightly in the black abyss of the rage and impotence” trapping him (Faulkner 22). The disc hung for years, Faulkner writes, because of a sense of indebtedness—first for not paying the seventy cents and second for needing to pay a penance for being a hot-headed boy. The indebtedness eventually is what compels Chick to help Lucas exonerate himself once he is facing the lynch mob.

Faulkner does much to connect Chick’s willingness to help clear Lucas’s name to the fact sense Chick feels indebted. After the cell-side talk with Gavin Stevens, Lucas requests some tobacco. Sensing the “mute patient urgency” of Lucas, Chick is stopped by his thoughts and a need to reconcile with the “nigger a murderer who shoots white people in the back and aint even sorry for it” (italics Faulkner’s 66). When Chick goes back to see Lucas in jail alone, it is because, in part, he feels obligated to show up. He returns, a little fearful, thinking: “Maybe he
will remind me of that goddamn plate of collards and sidemeat or maybe he’ll even tell me I’m all he’s got, all that’s left and that will be enough” (italics Faulkner’s 68). It is here that the reader can discern that Chick, to some degree, while being more open-minded than others, has resented owing a black man and his fear as well as his willingness to help come from that place. To be reminded of the plate of collards and sidemeat means the debt has been real and unforgotten and will have to be paid. Lucas is able to hold that over Chick’s head and Chick has to choose whether to honor it. Chick’s obligation is further shown by his view of Lucas’s need for his help (as the last and only resort) to be some sort of reckoning. Amid his fear, Chick hopes that Lucas will say Chick is all he has, “all that’s left” and that sort of near bankruptcy will be “enough” to settle the score between them. In these terms, having Lucas be subservient and needy will right the world that inverted when Chick fell off the footlog.

Once he hears Lucas’s request for him to dig up Gowrie’s body, Chick surmises, “So this is what that plate of meat and greens is going to cost me” (italics Faulkner’s 68). With this request, Chick becomes certain that what is owed is payable with more than seventy cents, some cigars and snuff and an imitation silk dress. The payment instead will take Chick recognizing that Lucas is a man and worthy of a man’s treatment, whether that is treatment to the due process in court or accepted hospitality after one falls in a creek. Chick is at first reluctant to take this on. He knows it will be difficult, which is why he comments about the “cost” of that meal. Unlike his counterparts in the South when they were called on the proverbial debts they owed blacks, Chick, however, is willing to try to make amends. He begins to see that by his willingness to help, “the almost insuperable chasm between him and old Negro murderer” was closing. When he recognizes he has not been called back by Lucas “because he was himself, Charles Mallison junior, or because he had eaten that plate of greens and warmed himself by the fire, but because
he alone of all the white people Lucas would have a chance to speak to […] would hear the mute unhoping urgency of the eyes,” he starts the process of not needing to dominate Lucas (Faulkner 68-69). In seeing that Lucas does not view the debt between them as payable monetarily, Chick learns that the debt was dignified—one man to another, not black to white or superior to inferior. Chick, by perceiving this, is compelled to help out not the “nigger” or the “nigger murderer” but the person who he begins to see might be his fellow man. Thadious M. Davis, in her chapter “Race and Region” in The Columbia History of the American Novel, cites this as the central lesson Faulkner includes in the novel. She writes:

Lucas Beauchamp…reappears in Intruder in the Dust (1948) as a mentor to Chick Mallison, a white youth who […] confronts the bigotry of his society and the racism within himself. Lucas enables Chick to transcend artificial boundaries separating the races and to restore a measure of justice in the interactions between blacks and whites. (428)

The “measure of justice” is that the personal doesn’t have to take on the cultural script.

Everything need not be black and white, or in the case of the text, nigger versus white man.

Moreover, the “measure of justice means” that debt and indebtedness should lead not to games of subjection and dominance but rather attempts at equalization.

One notable comment on debt and repayment occurs at the novel’s end. Freed from jail and exonerated of Vinson Gowrie’s murder, Lucas comes to the Stevens’s law office to pay for his legal services. Told that the price is two dollars, he at first pulls out a crumpled dollar bill, takes out a half dollar (much like the one Chick had tried to give him) and then counts out four dimes and two nickels (fifty cents). He then changes his mind. Picking up two of the dimes and a nickel, he replaces them with a quarter before quickly putting them down again and grabbing up the half-dollar (Faulkner 245-246). Having changed his mind about the half-dollar, he pays with a tobacco sack full of pennies. Stevens then makes Lucas count the one-cent pieces out because
“this is business.” Lucas does so without complaint (Faulkner 246). This dallying over how he’ll pay and in what kinds of currency isn’t mindless filler for the novel. If the novel poses questions about the debts owed to blacks and who will ultimately pay them, as the previous arguments suggest, this scene sets up the larger question of how those debts, once in arbitration, will be paid. The activist might want all bills on the table, while the moderate would be happy with the half-dollar plus four dimes and a nickel. The gradualist, in comparison, would most likely prefer the debts be paid one penny at a time. Lucas’s sampling and reconsideration of his method of payment can be read as a commentary on the willingness of blacks to negotiate the terms of payment, ultimately deciding on what the terms will be. Lucas doesn’t protest Stevens’s insistence that he count the pennies out. Clearing the slate is what is most important for Lucas and if it takes proving cent by cent that he has been cleared, he’s willing to do that.

Following this episode, Faulkner ends his critique of who owes whom in terms of civil rights with a comic, ringing final line. Having gone through the tedium of counting pennies and paying what he owed Gavin Stevens for his defense, Lucas remains in the lawyer’s office. Stevens looks up and asks: “Now what? […] What are you waiting for now?” Lucas’s reply of “My receipt,” reverberates with a symphony of truths. As the black everyman, Lucas verbalizes the fact he now stands as a man who has paid his debts and wants that recognized. In the context of the black American experience, the years of slavery, Reconstruction and Jim Crow, as well as of service as soldiers in World War I and World War II who returned home as second-class citizens, the gaining of civil and social rights symbolized debts paid. The proverbial “receipt” for those actions would mean a recognition of the fact that full citizenship and equality, although guaranteed by birth, had at least and at last been earned. Donald M. Kartiganer offers in his essay “The Comic Narrative of Community” that “the demand that blacks must earn their
rights is not made in *Intruder in the Dust*” but rather “what becomes clear in *Intruder in the Dust* is the additional insistence that whites must grant this equality not as a reward for anything that blacks may do to deserve or demand it, but because that equality is their unquestionable right by virtue of their membership within the homogenous community” (Gresset 146).

Kartiganer makes an astute analysis of how Lucas operates in the novel. However, his argument can be extended to draw out a larger point suggested by the text. Faulkner, in the novel, is not suggesting that blacks have more to do to get their rights. Surely, the black character, just as black people, has already earned his equality, just as Kartiganer expresses. Yet, in his presentation of Lucas, Faulkner seems to intimate that blacks continue to pay for the things they get and operate under the expectation that whites will have to recognize those regular payments and write those receipts of equality. Lucas’s steady assertion that he will pay for his defense, and his going to town in order to settle his previously uncalculated and unbilled legal expenses, conveys the sense that the black population is steadily paying for its equality. The rights that blacks are campaigning for in the early parts of the long civil rights movement and demanding throughout history are not just liberties they have previously earned as slaves or ex-slaves but are rights they constantly earn as a living, breathing, working American citizens. It is not, as Kartiganer aptly explains, a matter of blacks “los[ing] their equality out of some failure of character or courage” but it is also not simply “the responsibility of the South to grant blacks equality […] under the pressure of social justice itself” as if things have been vacuum-sealed (146). What blacks are owed, they are owed. They are not, however, complacent. Lucas waits for his receipt in one sense, but he demands it in another just by going to the table, settling his accounts and asking for it. We get the sense that Gavin Stevens can’t refuse him.
Receipts serve as proof of payment. They act as reminders of mutual agreements that are settled and closed. They declare services rendered, and in the case of civil rights, justice obtained. For Faulkner to end his critique of race relations, civil rights and social indebtedness with the black character asking for a receipt underscores a message that the South did owe something to its black residents: if not monetary repayment for services rendered, then the receipt of justice and equality. Faulkner’s plot and characterization suggest that if that justice and equality don’t arrive, blacks will be not merely content to wait for their receipts (read “just” dues) but will stand and demand payment in full.

Davis writes that in “assuming a racial heritage based on dominance and difference, Faulkner understood himself and his work in both racial and regional perspective” (426). This tendency is realized in Intruder in the Dust when Faulkner delves into the Southern white psyche and social constructions and reveals the response of both to black dignity and the request for black rights. Exploring indebtedness in both a personal and cultural sense, Faulkner manages to grasp the complexity of the odds blacks faced in gaining their rights and the tenor of white resistance, and manages still to offer, surprisingly, a sense that it could work out with the South still intact. Davis seems to draw similar conclusions when she adds that Faulkner “moved away from the existing discourses on race in the South by extracting an alternative vision of life offered by Southern African Americans, in particular, as a major part of the tensions about being, existence, and place that characterized the dialectic of much of his work” (427). Through Chick Mallison and Lucas Beauchamp striving to get past domination/subordination, the “alternative vision of life,” one illuminated by the dropping of coins and collective memory, is made clear.
CHAPTER 2

PENNY FOR A NICKEL: WHITE PRIVILEGE IN THE FACE OF BLACK RIGHTS

Flannery O’Connor’s depictions of the South in her novels and short stories have mixed the grotesque with grace and managed to thrill readers while showing them God’s presence in the everyday. An author who claimed she tried to avoid “topical” subjects such as race relations in her writing, O’Connor never quite managed to keep the issues of her day out of her stories, particularly in the latter parts of her career. For many Southern writers, Thadious M. Davis notes in her chapter “Race and Region” in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, “racial identity was one of the givens of their literary and cultural perspectives” (413-414). Yet, she adds, “Flannery O’Connor, who recognized that one source of tension in human existence had very much to do with belonging and not-belonging, was nevertheless uncomfortable with representing the other, the African American, in her rural world” (Davis 414). Often quoted as saying she did not know what went on in the minds of blacks—willing only to “see them on the outside”—O’Connor said she simply chose to omit that element in her work (Davis 414). Despite her expressed resolve to stay silent on race, a writer like O’Connor could not write about her region without writing about race and how it impacted the world. It wasn’t possible to create such racial distance and still create works that echoed the region simply because:

owing to a shared regional heritage with slavery as a major component and a present existence with segregation as a legal practice replete with “For Colored Only” and “For Whites Only” signs in public spaces, few Southern authors of any race could ignore the idea of race in social history, though not all chose overtly racial matter for their writings. (Davis 414)
It is the latter idea of not choosing “overtly racial matter” that Davis ascribes to O’Connor. The assessment is only partially true.

In his exploration of O’Connor’s works, ““The Topical is Poison””: Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of Social Reality in ‘The Partridge Festival’ and ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge,’” Rob Johnson explains that “many O’Connor stories deal more or less explicitly with relations between blacks and whites in the South (most notably in ‘The Artificial Nigger’),” as do several stories that make up the short story collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, including the title story, “Revelation” and “Judgement Day.” Warning readers that she considered the “topical is poison,” O’Connor played coy in her treatment of the pertinent social issues of her time. Yet Johnson says the author’s concern with the human condition, as well as a growing sense of how reality is sometimes better or just as good as fiction, led her to the topical. In the case of O’Connor, Johnson noted, the “*topical* is almost always related to the issue of race relations in the South, specifically the issue of the desegregation of public schools and the issue of equal access to public services and businesses” (7). The “immediate historical context” was a rich source of commentary and O’Connor, even against her own “will,” wasn’t unable to capitalize on those events and add her signature point of view to them (Johnson 7). Citing O’Connor’s college major of sociology, Jan Nordby Gretlund doesn’t buy into the idea that the author was unequipped or disinterested in speaking of the social or the topical. He offers in his article “The Side of the Road, Flannery O’Connor’s Social Sensibility” that “for a writer whose social concern is not supposed to have been notably pronounced, O’Connor displays a remarkable social sensibility. She takes into account the social problems of her day and comments in much of her fiction on the social order of her native society. Several stories of her fiction reflect the racial situation in much of the South during the 50s and 60s” (Gretlund 197).
Most popular criticism of O’Connor’s work seems to find ways to validate or support the notion that although O’Connor wrote about race and race relations, she usually made the effort not to make overt statements about such issues. As Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. offers in “Taking It to the Streets: Flannery O’Connor, Prophecy, and the Civil Rights Movement”:

O’Connor’s purpose when she wrote about racial injustice was, again simply put, first to make her readers see that injustice and then to make them see that by the light of the Incarnation—the spiritual standard of her work—that that injustice was, finally, insignificant, just as all other manifestations of human injustice, indeed, all other human activities, good and bad, were insignificant.” (106)

Concerned more with the state of man’s soul than the state of his social relations, O’Connor admittedly tried to avoid, if not fully address, matters of justice, reform or redress on the societal level. Instead, her focus was more on the individual transformation, especially the type of transformation that would lead to a recognition of salvation, grace and redemption. Even in her stories that dealt pointedly with black and white characters, racism, sexism and classism, O’Connor never seemed to thrust those themes to the forefront. They were merely setting and background; the catalyst for her religious message. Gretlund came to a similar conclusion, writing that “even if her concern is not to improve the material situation of poor whites and blacks, her fiction reveals her sympathies. Her characters, who often live in the country and mostly in Georgia, become concrete illustrations of social behavior through unsentimental characterizations” (197). Brinkmeyer rightly assumes that “O’Connor’s characteristic final dismissal of the significance of race, coming in stories in which up to that point often have delineated the deleterious effects of racial prejudice, troubles if not downright bewilders” readers. For those “contemporary readers who have been trained to be meticulously sensitive to racial issues,” O’Connor’s use of race and the racial to make a statement about humanity’s need
for grace and not social justice or civil reform doesn’t appease the desire for social commentary (Brinkmeyer 106).

Despite her unwillingness to “go there” or at least “stay there” and complete her critique of race and race relations in her works, O’Connor’s work can still be studied for what she has to say about race and race relations. Davis asserts that “in several of her short stories published in the posthumous volume *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), she turned to an exploration of racial interaction just as the Civil Rights movement began to change the face of the South” (414). While the collection offers several stories that might be useful in examining O’Connor’s framing of race relations and the reaction to black rights, the title story has the most explicit and extensive critique.

Set against the backdrop of the advancements of the Civil Rights Movement, in “Everything That Rises Must Converge” O’Connor places characters in and emphasis on the social confrontations of the time—primarily, integrated public transportation—and offers real conjectures on what it might all mean for the once, and still partially, segregated South. Noted among all of her works as the “one that [O’Connor herself] considered successful as well as a definitive statement on race relations,” the story is often studied for its representation of the response of Southerners to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement (Johnson 1). Scholars have lauded the story for its exploration of the issue. In his analysis, Gretlund says that “with ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’ (1961) she has given us one of the best fictional accounts of the breakdown in the late 1950s of the old order of the South” (198). With most of the action in the story set on and surrounding an integrated city bus, O’Connor is directly responding to the desegregation of public transportation as well as the calls for equal rights, equal treatment under the law and open public accommodations that were taking place all over
the South during the 1960s when she was writing the story (“Everything That Rises Must
Converge” was finished in 1961).

In the short story, O’Connor has some characters speak of the “mess” that the world is in
as protests and litigation for civil and equal rights abound, while other characters note the
“injustice in daily operation” (O’Connor 12). Along with exploring two opposing views of the
time, O’Connor constructs a representation of the Civil Rights Movement that shows that, as her
title suggest, blacks’ struggle for ascendancy will create confrontation, but more so, as her
characters illuminate, that confrontation will center on both social and economic equality. Davis
considers the clarity with which O’Connor writes of bus integration as a signal of O’Connor
“altering her perspective” and finally thinking she could compose stories about topical issues
such as racial demonstrations (414). I prefer Alice Walker’s view. In her essay “Beyond the
Peacock: Reconstructing Flannery O’Connor,” Walker writes that “each writer writes all the
missing parts of the other writer’s story” (Walker 49). If O’Connor left out anything (and she
did) in her previous stories that deal with race, in “Everything That Rises Must Converge” she
was working, perhaps, to put some things back in for herself. The first thing she reinserts is a
more direct commentary on what is at stake with the call for civil rights for blacks.

In their review of the collection, “Flannery O’Connor’s Religious Vision of Regime
Change,” Charles T. and Leslie G. Rubin suggest:

the focus on the South in Flannery O’Connor's last work, the collection of short stories
Everything That Rises Must Converge, is her reflection on a change of regime that was
reaching a culmination in the period during which the stories were written, roughly from
1956 to her death in 1964. Each story shows interactions among characters formed by or
struggling against ideas, expectations, or institutions that, in their egalitarianism or
materialism or progressivism, challenge old Southern ways and assumptions. While
examining these confrontations, O'Connor raises questions about the Old South and about the new American regime that reach far beyond the Mason-Dixon Line. (213)
The volume’s namesake story does this with regard to the Civil Rights Movement and the gains blacks were making toward being integrated with white society. Grounding “Everything that Rises Must Converge” in its historical context shows it as a production of the political and social climate of 1961 where the major focus was around how black Americans would achieve their civil rights. Alice Hall Petry notes in her article “Julian and O’Connor’s ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge,’” that having been written in the “turmoil attendant upon the Civil Rights Movement as Congress attempted to deal legislatively with social and economic changes which had been underway for a century and accelerated by a series of international wars,” “Everything That Rises Must Converge” cannot be separated from its time (102). In 1960, a year before O’Connor completed the story, the first student sit-ins in protest of segregated public accommodations took place in Greensboro, North Carolina. Mark Newman writes in his book *The Civil Rights Movement* that it was in Greensboro that four black male students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College “began the mass student sit-in movement […] when they sat down at a lunch counter in a Woolworth store […] and refused to leave after being denied service” (70). That same year the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed to spearhead and support the civil rights efforts of other students. By 1961 mass protests, boycotts and demonstrations were common occurrences in major cities across the South. Before these events, courts had ordered public schools to desegregate in response to the *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, decision from the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. Similarly, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 had triggered demonstrations for desegregating public transportation and accommodation, and by 1961 many cities had begun to integrate their buses. While the Freedom Rides that tested the laws prohibiting segregated public
accommodations wouldn’t begin until May of 1961—two months after O’Connor published her short story—there was a palpable tension resulting from social change that was occurring in and around the South.

O’Connor places her characters in “Everything That Rises Must Converge” in the midst of this atmosphere of challenge and change. Julian and his mother (O’Connor did not name her in the story) are white Southerners with two opposing views on “the world [and] the mess it’s in” (O’Connor 6). Julian feels little nostalgia for the old ways of living in the Old South, but for his mother there is nothing but nostalgia for the way things were. In the story, Julian is a college-educated, aspiring writer, who sells typewriters and still lives at home with his mother. He despises his mother and what she represents and even toys with the idea of participating in sit-ins or bringing “home a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman” simply to make his mother angry. Julian considers himself more open-minded than his mother, and to some degree he is (O’Connor 15). That his family owned a plantation house has meant almost nothing to him, and he figures he has a better appreciation for the family’s former status now that things have changed so much. It is he, O’Connor writes, who “preferred its [the plantation mansion’s] threadbare elegance to anything he could name” (8). Cognizant of the changing times and of the superficial nature of white superiority, Julian sets himself apart from those with more “old-fashioned” ideas about race. Julian proudly believes that in spite of his mother’s and the world’s “foolish views, he [is] free from prejudice and unafraid to face facts” (O’Connor 12).

On the other hand, Julian’s sincerity is lacking, at best, and misplaced, at worst. Petry critiques Julian as being not nearly as progressive as he would like to think he is. She notes that “what passes for a highly liberal, pro-minority stance may appear to be an immersion in reality, but, in fact, it is part of the pattern of avoiding reality” (“Julian” 106). Labeling Julian a
“reactionary” who wanted only to push his mother’s buttons and separate himself from the Southern society that he has become alienated from with his college education and inability to gain wealth, Petry characterizes Julian with the sense of inauthenticity O’Connor describes him with (“Julian” 106). Indeed, O’Connor also treats her character with a customary disdain that exposes with sarcastic wit his hypocrisies and idiosyncrasies. Julian, as O’Connor’s creation, doesn’t understand the struggle for black rights and black equality. Instead, as John R. May writes in his book *The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O’Connor*, “it is quite clear that Julian wants to hurt his mother more than make amends to God or Negroes” (95). Petry and May bring out a defining element of O’Connor’s story—albeit one that this paper won’t examine. If Julian’s mother is to represent from O’Connor’s view all that is wrong with the Old South, her son represents all that is wrong with some of the so-called liberals or progressives. To Julian black rights are merely a bandwagon, something to set himself apart from the white Southerners he holds in contempt. He feels no compassion for the black cause but rather seizes on that agenda for selfish gains.

Julian’s mother, in contrast to her son, is mired in the ways of the Old South. An heir to pre-civil rights Southern thought, daughter and granddaughter to men who were “classed” and well-entrenched in the upper echelons of the social hierarchy that kept blacks relegated to the underclass, she is a quintessential gradualist who would like things never to change and who believes that if they are to change, then they must change slowly. Petry examines Julian’s mother in her article “O’Connor’s ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’” and notes that “as Julian’s mother [was] wont to point out, she [was] related to the Godhighs and the Chestnys, prominent families of the Old South whose former status is conveyed nicely by the high ceilinged, double-staircased mansion which Julian had seen as a child” (Petry 51). Julian’s mother recalls fondly
life in the past where she had an “old darky who was my nurse” (O’Connor 8) and Julian’s “great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves” (O’Connor 6). To Julian’s mother, life then was as life should be. Blacks and whites were in their place, or knew their place, and things were in order.

In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, where she finds herself having to ride the bus, that is no longer the case. Instead of the old order, where whites could enjoy their privilege and blacks didn’t intrude, Julian’s mother has come to believe that “the bottom rail is on the top” (O’Connor 6). Blacks can ride in buses with her and sit beside her, no less. They are demanding rights and it is not just in her town. As she puts it: “The world is a mess everywhere” (O’Connor 10). Julian’s mother feels threatened by the equal rights movement around her. While she professes to have “always had a great respect for my colored friends,” and a relationship where she’d “do anything in the world for them and they’d…” do the same for her, Julian’s mother is a devout separatist (O’Connor 8). To her, the Civil Rights Movement is a phenomenon disturbing the world, and it should end. She believes blacks “were better off when they were [slaves]” and their agitation to be more, to be like whites, is too much for her to fathom (O’Connor 6). She tells Julian, “roll[ing] onto it every few days like a train on an open track,” that it was simply “ridiculous. It’s simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” (O’Connor 7). To Julian’s mom, the problem with the Civil Rights Movement was the idea of integration and equality.

Julian’s mother represents a disappearing white social class. Her family lines have the property-and people-ownership that once signified a reputable pedigree. She tells Julian that his “great-grandfather was a former governor of this state [with] a plantation and 200 slaves” and that his grandfather was “a prosperous landowner” (O’Connor 6). She is proud of her heritage
and some of her best memories involve the pleasures of the life she lived in the past. She recalls how she used to visit her grandfather and “stay down in the kitchen on account of the way the walls smelled. [And] would sit with [her] nose pressed against the plaster and take deep breaths” (O’Connor 7). Julian’s mother’s memory of how the kitchen smelled, the kitchen that was downstairs and presumably filled with blacks, shows how linked she is to the past and to racial separation. Her grandfather’s house that “had double stairways that went up to what was really the second floor” was the literal representation of the Southern class structure that kept blacks in their place at the bottom and whites at the top (O’Connor 7).

Despite her pretense and strong linkage to the past, Julian’s mother is no longer like her grandfather and the people he represented. Times are different. Not only are blacks being allowed in the front of buses but economics have been reversed. Old money hasn’t necessarily translated into new money and, as the lady with the protruding teeth on the bus later remarks, “boys from good families are stealing automobile tires” (O’Connor 10). Julian’s mother’s family hasn’t resorted to thievery but times have been hard. Described as “a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe him and put him through school and was supporting him still,” (O’Connor 4) Julian’s mother is the prime target of Y weight-reducing class: a working girl over fifty (O’Connor 3). Possibly never before would she or her predecessors have felt comfortable defining themselves as “working class.” With hundreds of slaves, they would have lived lives of leisure and the distinction was something that had been passed down. Julian’s mother can’t help but notice the class at the Y where “most of them in it [were] not our kind of people” (O’Connor 6). In that room, she doesn’t feel as if she belongs. In O’Connor’s story, however, she is the perfect candidate for the “reducing class.”
Read symbolically, Julian’s mother and her son represent the “reduced” class of white Southerners who were watching a decline in their social as well as financial status. She and her son live in a neighborhood that “had been fashionable forty years ago” but whose dirt lawns usually filled with “grubby” children speak to the area’s decline (O’Connor 4). One of the reasons she takes the weight reduction class at the Y is because it is free (O’Connor 3). She even has to take the bus, integrated or not, because she apparently has no family car. Julian laments that “some day I’ll start making money” but at present, there is not much money coming in and O’Connor adds that “he knew he never would [make money]” (O’Connor 5). Thus, Julian’s mother is in such financial difficulties that at the beginning of the story she is worried that she shouldn’t have purchased the hat with the velvet purple flap. Her buyer’s remorse doesn’t stem from the fact that the hat is ridiculous and “hideous” but rather from the fact that she simply can’t afford it (O’Connor 4). Bought new, the hat “had cost seven dollars and a half. She keeps saying, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have paid that for it. No I shouldn’t have. I’ll take it off and return it tomorrow, I shouldn’t have bought it’” (O’Connor 4). She tells Julian: “I was out of my head. I can pay the gas bill with that seven-fifty” (O’Connor 5). As much as she might just be trying to get her son’s approval for her latest personal expense, there seems to be truth in her concerns. Julian’s reaction seems to support the idea that the family might not be in the best of financial health. Grabbing her arm “in a vicious grip” the last time she threatens to take the hat off and return it, Julian essentially commands her to wear it (O’Connor 6). As O’Connor writes, “he mutter[s], more depressed than ever” for his mother to “Shut up and enjoy it” (O’Connor). Julian’s response seems to be loaded with the guilt of a son who recognizes how distant his mother and he are from living a life of leisure. Judging from her current state, Julian’s mother has moved a long way from being the descendant of a man who owned an estate that included
hundreds of slaves. Her thoughts of how she could have better spent her money on a household expense rather than a hat convey a new sense of priorities, and ultimately the collapse of white privilege. Far removed from the lavish life her forebears enjoyed, Julian’s mother represents the fall of the former Southern ruling class. Her thoughts and actions, however, show a woman who has yet to recognized that decline.

O’Connor makes it clear throughout the story that Julian’s mother hasn’t accepted her “reduced” state. While waiting for the bus, Julian observes his mother seated, “holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat, wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity” (O’Connor 8). Few other images in the short story offer so much about a character as this one does. Julian’s mother, in the face of having to lower herself, or look ridiculous, works to put on the façade of dignity. By the time the buses have been integrated, she is no longer at the level of the Godhighs and Chestnys that line her family tree. She, and many others like her, has lost that claim over the years. Yet even in her reduced state, she hasn’t let her problems affect how she carries herself. Described in the text as “one of the few members of the Y reducing class who arrived in hat and gloves,” (O’Connor 5) her “imaginary dignity” moves her through places that would have been thought crude or beneath her family at the prime of their social heights (O’Connor 8). Imagine a Godhigh or Chestny taking public transportation or attending a free class—such occurrences might not ever have happened. Land-holding descendants of former governors would not usually have to pinch their pennies or not have their own transportation.

Despite what descendants should have, there were some hard times in the family. As his mother tells Julian, the Godhighs had to have their mansion saved by the Chestnys who stepped in to pay the mortgage. Economic downturn at the turn of the twentieth century, along with the loss of the financial boon of slavery, more than likely brought the family to a difficult stage. His
mother continues her explanation of the Godhighs by saying, “They were in reduced circumstances [...] but reduced or not, they never forgot who they were” (O’Connor 7). That ability to remember who one is was one family heirloom Julian’s mother managed to keep: “I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am,” she concludes (O’Connor 6). In his mother’s world, she is not the Southern white gradualist clinging to the promise of the past even as the world changes around her. She is not the remnant of a ruling class that could not adapt to the years following Reconstruction. She is, still, a Chestny and by default, a Godhigh, and therefore still thinks she is entitled to the rights and privileges those names used to ensure. All of this is made clear when Julian’s mother explains to him that “you remain what you are” (O’Connor 6). As O’Connor writes it: “All of her life had been a struggle to act like a Chestny without the Chestny goods” (O’Connor 11). In other words, Julian’s mother has tried to live as if she were part of the Old South aristocracy long after that aristocracy was gone and when the institutions that had supported it were vanishing.

An interesting exchange takes place when Julian and his mother depart from home for the bus. The exchange puts into context all that O’Connor had been trying to convey in her previous pages about the willingness of Julian’s mother’s to cling to her past and, by extension, to white privilege. Following the “evil urge to break [his mother’s spirit]” Julian decides to take off his tie (O’Connor 8). Unloosening the cloth, removing it and placing it in his pocket, he visibly upsets his mother. She complains and he puts it back on with this exchange:

“Restored to my class,” he muttered. He thrust his face toward her and hissed. “True culture is in the mind, the mind,” he said, and tapped his head, “the mind.”
“It’s in the heart,” she said, “and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are.”
“Nobody in the damn bus cares who you are.”
“I care who I am,” she said icily. (italics O’Connor’s, 9)
Julian’s mother cares who she is but she is working from an antebellum script from when blacks “were better off when they were” slaves and her kin was at the top of the social order. To Julian’s mother the tide of rising black influence and campaign for black rights were undeniable signs that things were not just changing but going in the wrong direction.

What Julian’s mother is faced with in all of this—from having to ride the bus with blacks through having to attend free weight reduction classes to supporting a brilliant son who would never be as successful as his relatives before him—is the breakdown of white privilege. It doesn’t matter as much who she is nor who her forebears were. At the point in history O’Connor is writing, Julian is right: “nobody” cares, especially as he points out, nobody who is riding the bus. The place where the idea of class matters is not in the street with the regular people. The place of his mother’s grand lineage, now reduced to just memories, is not at the bus stops. Julian tells his mother, “you haven’t the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are,” and as cruel as he sounds, he is right (O’Connor 6). His mother, despite “being adjustable” enough to go from a high-ceilinged mansion to a regular house in a once-up-and-coming neighborhood, has not adjusted to the ways of the brave, new world she is finding around her (O’Connor 8). She still operates with a sense of white privilege that makes her take satisfaction in the fact that she, Julian, and the white lady with the protruding teeth have the bus to themselves—meaning without black passengers (O’Connor 10). She sees the success of the civil rights movement as a defeat for her way of life, remarking that she doesn’t “know how we’ve let it get in this fix” (O’Connor 10). The “we” she is referring to is the ruling white class.

With her dignified Chestny-Godhigh lineage, Julian’s mother believes that her kind should be on top, that things should remain much as they were in the old mansion. Not that blacks should necessarily be slaves, although she thought they were better off when they were,
but that they should be relegated to the kitchen or the first floor while her kind ascends to the second floor (O’Connor 7). Blacks, then, should accept their lower, separate station, and, by extension, recognize the dominance of whites and the whites’ ability to “be gracious” (O’Connor 6). Later in the story, Julian speaks of this. After his mother gets off the bus and lies stunned from the attack of the black woman, he exclaims, “You aren’t who you think you are” (O’Connor 22). Julian then explains that “From now on you’ve got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change” (O’Connor 22). At the point of her confrontation with the lady on the bus, Julian’s mother hasn’t been living in the new world, which is part of the reason things turn out as they do.

On the bus Julian’s mother has to face directly that new world where blacks and whites meet on the same plane and share the same space. At first she expresses relief that the bus is filled only with whites, then several black passengers come aboard. She’s only slightly agitated when a black man, “well dressed and carry[ing] a briefcase” boards the bus, “look[s] round and then [sits] down on the other end of the seat” where a white woman had been sitting (O’Connor 12). When he gets on the bus, the white woman moves so she does not have to sit beside “the Negro” (O’Connor 12). At this small protest, Julian’s mother “leaned forward and cast her an approving look” for being willing to leave her seat instead of sharing the seat with a black man. This action demonstrates Julian’s mother’s resentment to black social gains and paints her as a proponent of white resistance to the equal rights movement. Moments later, when Julian leaves his seat to spite his mother and to engage with the black man, his mother looks at him with a face “turned an angry red” (O’Connor 13). This anger could have been for her son’s malicious attempt to embarrass her, but the text seems to suggest something more. The woman with the protruding teeth, who up to this point in the story has seemed to be of one accord with Julian’s
mother, gives clues as to what causes “his mother to [keep] her eyes fixed reproachfully on his face” after he changed seats (O’Connor 13). Having watched Julian intentionally move to sit next to the black man after another white woman moved away, the woman with the protruding teeth “was looking at him avidly as if he were a type of monster new to her” (O’Connor 13). Was this woman aware of the game Julian was playing with his mother or was she merely reacting to his crossing the imaginary line of social decorum and choosing to sit next to a black man?

In her book, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*, Jennifer Ritterhouse describes the foundation on which Julian’s mother and the woman with the protruding teeth are operating. Although Julian’s mother no longer belongs to the white upper class, (we assume the woman with the protruding teeth doesn’t either) many of her actions toward blacks have roots in that class. Ritterhouse explains that “even in the twentieth century, many whites, particularly middle- and upper-class whites who prided themselves on their ‘noblesse oblige,’ desired intimate but demonstrably unequal relations” to blacks (14). This often meant viewing separation as inherent to social decorum and where it could not be attained, at least there needed to be deference, particularly because “far more than physical separation, white southerners wanted social distance” (Ritterhouse 15). The public bus would be one of those places where if separation wasn’t fully possible (as in restricted cars) then certainly there should be recognized constraints that let blacks know that sitting next to whites was unacceptable. For Julian willfully to break this code would be hurtful, worthy of reproach, and—considering the growing hostilities between blacks and whites during the Civil Rights Movement when many whites thought blacks were asking too much—monstrous. For someone entrenched in the code of separatism, watching a white man purposely sit by a black would be frightening. O’Connor writes that by the time the not-so-progressive Julian is being snubbed by the black man he sits
next to, his mother retained a “battered look.” She is disappointed in him and the state of the world. What happens with Julian, however, is nothing compared to what happens when the next passengers board.

As the bus stops, “a large, gaily dressed, sullen-looking colored woman [gets] on with a little boy” (O’Connor 15-16). The two sit down with Julian and his mom, only the little boy’s mother “squeeze[s] herself” next to Julian while her son sits next to Julian’s mother (O’Connor 16). Looking at his mom, Julian spitefully sees “with satisfaction that this [is] more objectionable to her [his mother] than it was to him” (O’Connor 16). At first visibly disturbed by the seating arrangements, Julian’s mother soon warms to the situation but only after being able to find that “imaginary dignity” again. Julian’s mother is at first bothered by the woman’s entry onto the bus and her taking a seat beside Julian. He observes his mother, noticing how “her face seem[s] almost gray and there [is] a dull recognition in her eyes, as if suddenly she ha[s] sickened at some awful confrontation” when the black woman gets on (O’Connor 16-17). She is not pleased that this black woman, like the black man earlier, would take a seat among white people. The woman’s audacity had to strike Julian’s mother as a sign of things gone steadily awry. Her upbringing would prevent her from thinking blacks and whites should share the same space without one (the blacks) being in the subordinate position. That lesser position also included blacks not having access to the same privileges as whites: buses or hats.

When Julian’s mother recognizes that the black woman on the bus is wearing an identical hat—a hat she had explained was supposed to mean that “at least” she was not to “meet myself coming and going”—two worlds collide (O’Connor 5). The woman Julian calls his mother’s “black double,” because she has a son, the same hat, and is also overweight, is in direct contradiction to what she should be socially (O’Connor 21). She can afford the hat that Julian’s
mother questioned whether she could spare the expense of and she doesn’t think twice about sitting next to white people on the bus. Both behaviors defy long-held beliefs of white privilege and black inferiority that underscore whites inherently thinking they should have more than blacks. While Julian laughs at the serendipity of it all, his mother is wounded by the black mother’s presence, hence the “bruised purple” tone in her eyes (O’Connor 17). The injury doesn’t last long, however, as his mother, obviously remembering her place as a white woman, a Chestny no less, instead finds the situation comical.

O’Connor writes how her “mouth began to twitch slightly at one corner” as if Julian’s mother is suppressing a smile. As she notices the woman’s cute son, her bruised ego gives way and “an amused smile [comes] over her face as if the woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat” (18). Alice Walker interprets the scene like this:

The white woman, in an attempt to save her pride, chooses to treat the incident of the identical hats as a case of monkey-see, monkey-do. She assumes she is not the monkey, of course. She ignores the idiotic-looking black woman and begins instead to flirt with the woman’s son, who is small and black and cute. (50)

Restored back to her class because she has dismissed the woman and the hat, Julian’s mother can no longer harbor anger at the black woman’s audacity because she has reduced her to a simple copy cat. The woman, as the word “monkey” suggests, merely apes whites. O’Connor’s use of “monkey” simultaneously brings to mind the racial epithet of blacks being called monkeys. Shifting from anger to amusement, Julian’s mom condescends to dote on the woman’s “cute” son. The text explains: “His mother lumped all children, black and white, into a common category, ‘cute,’ and she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children” (O’Connor 16). The little boy, whose name is Carver, gives Julian’s mother reassurance in what is a shaky situation. She might not know how to deal with a black man
sitting next to a black woman on a bus, she might be taken aback by a black woman squeezing into a seat next to white people, but she knows how to deal with little black boys. Carver poses no threat to her and gives her a chance to be “gracious,” or paternalistic. The socioeconomic framework and ideologies to which Julian’s mother subscribes help explain why she reacted as she did to the black woman on the bus and her son. Ritterhouse describes white-black social relations as being partially based in paternalistic instinct. To whites separate “social relations […] fit with their conceptions of a natural racial hierarchy and of themselves as benevolent superiors” (14). According to Ritterhouse, paternalistic whites could be doting yet distant, humane and yet still believe themselves superior to blacks. The interactions on the bus exhibit most of those traits.

The story proceeds with Julian’s mother beginning to turn her attention to the little black boy beside her with a “short plaid suit and a Tyrolean hat with a blue feather in it” (O’Connor 16). Having “been trying to attract her attention for some time,” Carver had managed to get it (O’Connor 18). She smiles at him, encouraging him to play with her even after his mother orders him away from the seat he has chosen next to her. Julian’s mother then tells the woman with the protruding teeth how “cute” Carver is, not addressing the compliment to his mother who sits right across from her. In Julian’s mother’s time, it wouldn’t be unheard of to ignore the black adult in the room, as whites often didn’t view black adults as equals for conversation or civil regard. By making this comment to another woman, rather than the boy’s mother, Julian’s mother propagates that sort of invisibility. The only words she speaks to Carver’s mother are loaded with condescension and magnanimity. As Carver escapes from his mother’s lap and runs back “giggling wildly, onto the seat beside his love,” Julian’s mother says her only words to his mother (O’Connor 18). Watching what has taken place before her and the child’s fascination
with her, she says: “I think he likes me” and then smiles again. O’Connor writes “It was the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior” (18). In that moment, Julian’s mother reverts to old habits by essentially pronouncing her worth over blacks. She does it, unconsciously or not, with the patronizing smile and by pointing out that the little boy has obviously “chosen” her—a white woman—over his mother. Julian sees this as a lesson lost, but Carver’s mother sees it as yet another indignity and yanks her child away from the white woman. Moments later, Julian’s mother, undeterred, is playing peek-a-boo with the child across the aisle.

Again, O’Connor doesn’t make clear that Julian’s mother is purposefully doing anything wrong. In fact, she speaks about the “innocence” Julian glimpses in his mother before the entire episode begins (O’Connor 17). Charles T. and Leslie G. Rubin catch on to this presumed innocence in their analysis, stating that “Julian's mother is innocent in her inability to understand the ‘symbolic significance’ of the identical hats or the patronizing attitude that prompts her to give the little boy a penny” and to ignore his mother (219). What could be innocence, however, could just as well be insensibility. Because she considers herself and her heritage as superior to blacks, it doesn’t faze her that someone might take offense at how she acts toward the child.

Throughout the scene, Julian’s mother ignores Carver’s mother’s scolding her son because of his interactions with the older white woman. On several occasions Carver’s mother admonishes her son to “Be-have” and “Quit yo’ foolishness” after he had done something that amused Julian’s mother. As he revels in the “spotlight” of the white woman, his mother orders him away. Later, as he grins, bent over backwards, at Julian’s mother, his own mother “yank[s] him upright” (O’Connor 18). Carver’s mother even slaps his legs for his continuing to disobey her, yet Julian’s mother is oblivious to all of this (O’Connor 19). She refuses to see that the black mother does not want her son to be the entertainment nor the “cute” black child on the bus. On some
level, Julian’s mother might have seen it as harmless fun to play with Carver and ignore his mother’s obvious discomfort. It is probable she was caught up in adoration but because her heritage makes it no slight to undermine a black mother, her behavior resonates with something more. Julian’s mother had already expressed her belief in how “training tells” with a child when she was first talking to the woman with the protruding teeth (O’Connor 10). She therefore knows the importance of parents having control and of children responding obediently as children. Yet, had her stop not come up, her behavior would have continued. It simply did not register with her that she should consider the woman and her son in any other way. Nor did it occur to her that her actions were offensive. The depth of this social programming is dramatized as all four riders disembark the bus.

Delighted by the exchange with Carver, and possibly seeing the world as right side up again, Julian’s mother once more smiles “down” at him, but this last time she “opened her bag” (O’Connor 18). Lunging to the front of the bus and dragging her son behind, Carver’s mother had already left her seat when Julian notices his mother preparing to give Carver a gift, a gift O’Connor explains that she gives all little, cute black children. Julian is said to have thought “the gesture would be as natural to her as breathing” (O’Connor 19). Privilege, and the sense of paternalism it fostered in whites toward blacks, made moments of such graciousness possible, if not prerequisite. For those benevolent whites, feeling pity for those they considered helpless or beneath them and sensing their higher economic status often resulted in the presentation of coins to black children. Julian’s mother looks for a nickel for Carver. Not finding one, but still being compelled to give some monetary show of benevolence and, arguably, superiority, she presents the penny. Enraged that her son is being treated as a charity case, reduced to a mere token of a white woman’s affection, and probably reeling from Julian’s mother insistence on continuing to
act out the old black-white script, Carver’s mother explodes. Julian watches as “the black fist swing[s] out with the red pocketbook” (O’Connor 20). Knocked to the ground, Julian’s mother faces the pain of being assaulted, the shock at being refused, and, presumably, the confusion of what had taken place. The black woman walks away in a huff, decrying the audacity of a white woman, or anyone, to give her child a penny.

There are various interpretations to what happened with Julian’s mother and Carver’s mother over the penny. One of the more unique analyses comes from John Ower. In his article, “The Penny and the Nickel in ‘Everything that Rises Must Converge,’” Ower posits that “the designs of the [coins] suggest a nexus of meanings relating to the social, racial and religious themes” of the story” (107). To Ower, the two sides of the penny contain significant symbols (Ower 107):

These three details have an obvious relevance to O’Connor’s sympathetic concern with the “rise” of Southern blacks from slavery towards true freedom and socio-economic equality. Thus, the features of the Lincoln cent just mentioned suggest (1) the freeing of Negroes by the ‘Great Emancipator’ and (2), by extension, the activity of the Federal Government in O’Connor’s own day to ensure the rights of Southern blacks. Regarding the second, the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and its aftereffects (including the sit-ins of 1960) constitute the immediate historical background for the action of the [story]. (Ower 107)

To Ower, the “story suggests how the crumbling of the ‘Jim Crow’ system was making possible a new ‘liberty’” for Southern blacks which is exactly what Lincoln and the penny represent in the story (Ower 107). O’Connor’s mention that the penny is “a bright new” (O’Connor 20) coin is interpreted as a sign of “the new possibilities for betterment opening to blacks (Ower 107). Ower notes that Julian’s mom, who obviously had “retrograde desire […] to reduce Negroes to their antebellum servitude” wouldn’t be aware of the symbolic nature of her actions and how the
penny via Lincoln stood for Emancipation (108). In Ower’s analysis, however, O’Connor’s imagination was riddled with a historic sense of the meaning of the minted coins. While he might be taking his examination too deeply, his explanation does have interesting implications. He writes that the “nickel in part suggests the conservative and patrician outlook of Julian’s mother, the quasi-mythical old South in which she psychologically dwells” (108). President Thomas Jefferson, whose likeness is impressed upon the nickel, has a lot in common with Julian’s mother’s forebears. Jefferson was a slaveholder with a plantation and a stately mansion and was once governor of a state (Ower 108). Beyond that, Ower writes, “the Jefferson nickel is especially appropriate as the usual coin for [...] largesse because it implies the identification with the Southern aristocracy that determines the racial views of Julian’s mother” (108). Both coins, in Ower’s argument, bear a notation that connects them with O’Connor’s vision for her text. Inscribed with “E PLURIBUS UNUM” or “out of many, one,” there is the same concept invoked by O’Connor’s title “Everything That Rises Must Converge.”

As suggestive as both coins and their inscriptions are, perhaps the most significant symbolism associated with the coins concerns the coin that gets presented to the young boy. A lot can be said about why Julian’s mother can find only a new penny instead of her usual coin. The soundest reason is that perhaps because of her “reduced” economic state, her nickels are in short supply. She is financially strained, which is why she was pondering her need to return the seven-and-a-half-dollar hat. Her nickels could have all been spent. Ower suggests, however, that O’Connor had larger motives. He writes that the penny and the nickel:

relate the racial situation in the South of 1961 to a larger cultural, historical and spiritual context. On the one hand, the Lincoln cent suggests a century of political, social and economic progress elevating blacks toward a final Teihardian convergence with whites.
On the other hand, the Jefferson nickel most obviously intimates a conservative, aristocratic mentality contributing to Southern white resistance to integration. Whether one buys Ower’s argument or not, O’Connor’s decision to let her character find a lesser coin is crucial to the meaning of the story. Not only does the penny act as evidence of Julian’s mother’s reduced social status but also having to substitute a penny for her regular nickel connects the Civil Rights Movement to economic concerns, particularly to what was even or “fair” trade when it came to rights. The inability of Julian’s mother to find the coin she’d normally use and then to surmise it was good enough not because it was new “but it looks like a new one” speaks volumes (O’Connor 20). Julian’s mother isn’t aware enough at all to see that “good enough” is one of the problems the Civil Rights Movement is trying to resolve (O’Connor 20). Money, regardless of whether it is newly minted or worth five cents, isn’t recompense or substitute for anything in the matter of rights. Similarly, a separate school that is unequal isn’t an adequate substitute either. She doesn’t make the connection, even in the sin of being paternalistic, that she is committing another offense by giving the boy an inferior coin. Indeed, what can a little boy do with a penny in world where a seven-dollar-and-fifty-cent hat costs too much?

Ower comes to a much different conclusion about the far-reaching implications of the choice of coins. He considers that it is the “ultimate defeat” to white resistance to integration when Julian’s mother can’t find a nickel (Ower 110). He concludes that “O’Connor is suggesting that the old South called to mind by the five cent piece is gone forever” and so the penny represents the arrival of the need for “Southern whites to accept social change, abandon their obsolete racial views and relate to Negroes in a radically different way” (Ower 110). O’Connor seems less obsessed with the denomination of the coin as with what the entire act signified. Filled with schadenfreude, in the text Julian tells his mother “What all this means […] is that the
old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn” (O’Connor 21). In other words, neither a penny nor a dime can replace dignity and respect.

If by pulling out the penny, Julian’s mother did not notice the significance of presenting the coin, she would, however “feel it” (O’Connor 17). The feeling in the end is in triad: physical, emotional and psychological. As Carver’s mother storms down the street she “shouts back” that her son “don’t take nobody’s pennies” (O’Connor 20). To her, to accept the paltry sum, or any sum, is akin to being bought or sold like slaves. A black woman in the South would be keenly aware of such a history; however, Julian’s mom is unmindful of it. She does not realize the impact of what giving another woman’s child, particularly a black child, a nickel can mean. Furthermore, the gift of the penny was meant to show a benevolence and kindness Julian’s mother didn’t really feel. Ower considers it as a “wrongheaded strategy” to “use the coin suggesting a new order to appropriate the old” as Julian’s mother “stubbornly clings to a quasi-mythical past” (110). As astute as that analysis is, it doesn’t cover what is really going on in the text. Needless to say, the boy’s mother would have been insulted by the gesture whether it had been a penny or a nickel, but the penny made it that much worse.

Brown like the boy, the penny is problematic because the coin-giving, as Julian explains has patronizing, demeaning overtones. He tells his mother, as her legs are “stretched out in front of her and her hat was on her lap” that she had it coming (O’Connor 20). Angry at having had his warning and advice ignored, Julian surmises, “You got exactly what you deserved” (O’Connor 20). Julian’s mother had insulted the woman, perhaps in more ways then he could even fathom, especially since he focuses only on the penny presentation and not on how she acted on the bus. By encouraging the child against his mother’s will and then trying to give him a “token” for whatever socially-constructed/ racially-scripted reason, she had crossed the line and provoked
the wrath of Carver’s mother. Julian blames his mother’s unwillingness to change with the times and to respect the dignity of all people—Chestnys, Godhighs or “darkys”—for her being knocked off her pedestal of privilege, benevolence and separatism and onto the street. Unable and not wanting “to conceal his irritation,” he tells her “I hope this teaches you a lesson” but he doesn’t believe she’ll get it (O’Connor 21). Fed up and cruel, Julian decides to spell it out for her, just as O’Connor spells it out for her audience:

He saw no reason to let the lesson she had had go without backing it up with an explanation with its meaning. She might as well be made to understand what had happened to her. ‘Don’t think that was just an uppity Negro woman,’ he said. ‘That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you … (O’Connor 21).

The entire scene is emblematic. It isn’t about pennies and one angry black woman “rumbling like a volcano about to become active” as she sat by Julian’s side (O’Connor 17). What occurs is the individual confrontation that symbolized what was at stake in the larger movement. No longer were blacks, according to Julian, going to take being ignored on buses as adults and then have their children be given pennies. They could be equals, wear the same hats, and want the same respect. It was a new day.

In their review of the collection and short story, Charles and Leslie Rubin come to the same conclusion about the scene’s commentary on civil rights. They write that “the crux of the plot, when Julian's mother is struck by a black woman, suffers a seizure, and dies, turns essentially on the new political society of the South—a world in which white women may no longer give pennies to ‘cute ... little Negroes’ without arousing wrath” (214). What’s more, since O’Connor tied the crux of the conflict to a coin, blacks were no longer going to be financially reduced to a position of economic inferiority. And whites would no longer be able to use their
economic goods, and the sense of “pride of ancestry and class status” to dominate their fellow black citizens (Ower 110).

Before the scene where Julian’s mother pulls open her purse to find a coin for Carver, there are economic undertones to the story. O’Connor writes that early in the story Julian wishes to sit besides blacks on the bus “in reparation, as it were, for his mother’s sins” (8). O’Connor, a devout Catholic, would know that one sits in penance or even in repentance for sin. To use “reparation,” a word loaded with the connotations of slavery, Emancipation and black progress, is not merely a writer’s careless choice of words. Reparations call to mind forty acres and a mule, or any payment associated with slavery, Reconstruction and the economic sabotage of Jim Crow. O’Connor would know as much and reaches here for a unifying concept to convey just how wrapped up the movement for civil rights was with a movement for economic rights. There were plenty of “economic dimensions [to] the movement” and by layering her story with those economic symbols and ties, O’Connor is trying to bring them out (Hall 1235). Giving pennies (or nickels) to young black children is not something particular to Julian’s mother. The practice goes back for generations and therefore carries the weight of history. When Julian tells his mother that “the old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn” he extends the economic concept underlying the story’s theme (italics mine, O’Connor 21). O’Connor notes that after Julian made this statement, “he thought bitterly of the house that had been lost for him” (21-22). The house was the old mansion or plantation house that both he and his mother remember as the last bastion of their family among the white ruling class. Given their present situation and the situation of the country, Julian is right that what they cling to doesn’t have value anymore. Monetarily, no one cares about all the old money that was lost to the Old South families. Julian’s mother’s heritage does little for their present economic state. In fact, in the Changing South and
the New South, the old manners and mores built on slavery will have less economic impact than before. White merchants, in pursuit of the black dollar, would no longer hesitate to sell to black customers. As the hat shows, the sales lady at the store had no qualms about selling the same “hideous” hat to both a black and white woman. While she might have thought the two would never meet—blacks living theoretically in one world and whites in another—it is more likely that she wasn’t seeing black or white: she was simply seeing money.

Even if Carver’s mother and Julian’s mother didn’t shop at the same store, the fact that marketing and commercialism had become so widespread suggests a changing culture where anyone with money can make a purchase. It also brings to bear the idea of why many blacks protested and boycotted. In 1960 students were sitting in at lunch counters demanding equal service. In 1961 and beyond, when activists boycotted department stores that wouldn’t serve them or hire them, an entire target of the Civil Rights Movement was based on dismantling social structures so that there would no longer be race-based restrictions against having something one could afford—be that houses or hats or hamburgers. In the context of the time, the economic fed into the social and both were addressed in the movement.

It is pertinent to look at what else, beyond benevolence and economics, O’Connor made explicit with her characters and plot. In one sense, she makes comment about the rise of black discontent. Throughout the story she tells of Carver’s mother’s low rumbling. Despite wearing a “DON’T TAMPER WITH ME look,” there is something else going on beneath the surface. Carver’s mother is literally and symbolically troubled (O’Connor 16). As she sits next to Julian, he hears her mutter “something unintelligible to herself” and he “was conscious of a kind of bristling […] a muted growling like that of an angry cat” (O’Connor 17). There is an unarticulated anger in Carver’s mother that can be read as the unarticulated anger of the entire black population. She is
already on edge and the white passengers, save Julian, don’t seem to notice. Instead, they add fire to her steam. O’Connor makes much of Carver’s mother “rumbling like a volcano about to become active” before she describes Julian’s mother’s disregard of the black woman’s parental rights. For the most part, Carver’s mother keeps her angst to herself. She chides Carver but says nothing more during the bus ride. However, the story suggests that after Julian’s mother gives her the condescending smile and tells of Carver’s affections, she reacts. O’Connor writes: “Julian could feel the rage in her at having no weapon like his mother’s smile” (O’Connor 18). In this case, the text suggests that the black woman, like other blacks, had nothing with which to fight back against white society with. Carver’s mother, then, is pushed to the limit and she physically strikes out. She had tried controlling her son, but that hadn’t worked. She is left only to rage outwardly—as she does at last with the red pocketbook. This portion of the story, which critics construe as demonstrating the black mother’s intolerance, shows remarkable insight by O’Connor into black activism. Civil rights demonstrations were not about being intolerant; they were about not having any other means of redress. O’Connor, the author who said she dared not get into the black psyche, somehow taps into the inner rage of blacks that most whites had been capable only of ignoring.

The title of this story also provides some insight in to what else O’Connor has to say about the Civil Rights Movement. In the story, the element that is rising is black society and what is converging are the Old South and the Changing South on their way to being the “New” South. The title, like the outcome of the story, suggests conflict, violent conflict, just as when Julian’s mother meets her “black double.” In putting her main characters in a situation where they are likely to meet their worst fears, O’Connor sets up a clash. Confronting a woman who is dressed like her, and could be her but black, unsettles Julian’s mother who is so certain she
knows who she is as a white woman. Used to considering herself as superior to blacks, to meet Carver’s mother and see so much of herself in a black person shifts her perspective in a way she can’t understand. She can see, or should see, in Carver’s mother some commonality. She should be able to feel some sisterhood, some bond of motherhood, but all she sees, in Julian’s speculation, is a “monkey.”

John R. May concludes in his book that in the story “the racial convergence takes place on the integrated bus to the Y, when the Negro woman, caught in the rising tide of an impatient oppressed minority, lashes out against the patronizing generosity of the gradualistic majority” (95). Julian’s mother is by all accounts a gradualist. She not only thinks and says that blacks “should rise,” which carries an element of delay in the “should,” but her mantra is that “Rome wasn’t built in a day” (O’Connor 5, 11). It is not just coincidental that O’Connor includes this old saying. For Julian’s mother, progress should not be rushed. Things take time in her view, particularly things that last. By using the idea of “Rome,” she is telling Julian that things will get better for him soon enough—he just needs to remember to be patient. Having her main character parrot the lines “Rome wasn’t built in a day” in a story set on an integrated bus that ends with a violent attack can only be understood as O’Connor remarking on some views of the Civil Rights Movement and the demand for black betterment. Progress comes, the mantra notes, but it takes time. What happens when that change occurs is highlighted in the story when Julian chides his mother saying that she needs to accept the developments that have created a clash in her world. He tells her that black rights “won’t kill you,” and moments later we see his mother crumple to the ground and call for her old black nurse (O’Connor 22).

With this ending, O’Connor might be making her most vocal comment yet about the movement. If Julian’s mother and Carver’s mother are true emblems, then the Old South and its
supporters won’t survive the movement and even as they face their ends, they will be throwbacks to the old days. Similarly, the blacks and the movement won’t be able to stay nonviolent in the face of their oppressors and tormentors. There will be few cases where a true understanding is fostered and the young, having to look over their mother’s shoulders, will be left only with a “world of guilt and sorrow” (O’Connor 23). In O’Connor’s vision, the world after the clash between blacks and whites and their inability to share the same space or rise together, will be a world where no one is innocent of prejudice or anger and where distress at the condition of human relations abounds.

As Julian’s mother lies dying, she calls out for her old nurse, Caroline. John R. May offers:

The request for Caroline triggers his [Julian’s] realization that, for all its defects, the older generation had more genuine personal feeling for Negroes than his with its heartless liberalism. And the gratuitous violence of the black woman’s action contrasted with the anticipated comforts of a Negro nurse intensifies Julian’s painful awakening to the complexity of racial tension (97).

Many scholars of “Everything That Rises Must Converge” consider that the story ends in the typical O’Connor fashion. Set to make a statement about salvation, O’Connor is assumed to be focusing on the revelatory moment. In this case, it would be Julian’s being awakened by his mother’s death. However, just as much emphasis should be placed on his mother’s apparent lack of awakening. Having just been knocked down, literally by the weight of history, she doesn’t seem to grasp what is actually going on. Even after Julian explains to her that what occurred happened because the world is changing, we never see the mother accept or adapt to this change. Instead, she dies, calling for the past and ignoring her son who might have a distorted, but slightly improved, handle on the future. When Julian’s mother climbs to her feet, her first words are a call to “Home” (O’Connor 21, 22). At first Julian, like the reader, assumes she wants to go
back to the failing neighborhood. It isn’t until she instructs Julian to “Tell Grandpa to come get me” that her real destination is clear (O’Connor 22). Julian’s mother is wishing not to get back to the comforts of her present home but instead to the once-great mansion now in decay. She calls for the same grandfather who owned slaves and kept the blacks on the first floor. She is longing for a place where blacks would have taken the penny or nickel with gratitude and they certainly would never have assaulted a white person. Her “home” is a place untouched by the movement.

Julian’s mother’s last words aren’t “Why?” or “How could she?” but instead another request: “Tell Caroline to come get me” (O’Connor 22). Julian’s mother does need a nurse, but calling for the old black nurse from her childhood, the black woman who probably suckled her as a baby and was more personal servant than a personal physician, is more than a cry for help. It is a cry for return to the olden days. It is the same “headlong movement in the wrong direction” that O’Connor suggests Julian’s mother took when she first got to her feet (O’Connor 21). The text suggests that Julian’s mother hasn’t learned anything. She still feels herself the victim, refusing to see how she has victimized Carver and Carver’s mother. This section of the story brings to bear yet another observation O’Connor might be making about the movement. If Julian’s mother is to be any example, then her reaction suggests that the first response of whites to the call for black rights is not going to be acceptance or even a questioning of what has been the “wrong” committed but rather a wish for old times. At the end of the story, Julian has definitely changed but there is an indictment of his mother. Confronted with the significance of her actions, she dies, clinging to the past, rather than adjusting. It’s a message for the gradualist Southerner, no doubt.

In “‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’: O’Connor’s Seven-Story Cycle” author Harbour Winn points out that in each of the stories of the collection, “O’Connor dramatizes [a]
struggle of rising to higher consciousness by focusing on characters whose egoism distorts their perception, blinding them to the transforming power of the divine work in the world” (191).

Winn concludes that the work includes such dramatizations in terms of race, class and religion. In “Everything That Rises Must Converge” the characters’ egoism distorts their view of the racial implications of the Civil Rights Movement. It is a rich text to probe, but also included in the indictments is the message about money and moral superiority. In depicting the movement, O’Connor had to include the economic links and show how those money ties did and did not affect what was taking place. Alice Walker commented in her essay “Beyond the Peacock: Reconstructing Flannery O’Connor” that the “moment of revelation, when the individual comes face to face with her own limitations and comprehends ‘the true frontiers of her own country,’ is classic O’Connor, and always arrives in times of extreme crisis and loss” (56). This can be said of both the characters in “Everything that Rises Must Converge” and of O’Connor the writer. Perhaps in 1961, O’Connor could no longer ignore the changes in her world. The topical, be it poison or not, was reality. At the moment of crisis and loss, in terms of the struggle for black rights against the Southern white hierarchy, it was time for some sort of revelation and O’Connor provides it. Of the many messages in her text, the ringing warning is that no one involved on either side of the Movement will escape unscathed, yet all should work for understanding.
CONCLUSION

During and after the Civil Rights Movement, those involved with it, affected by it, and in the study of it, have grappled to contextualize what it means. A concerted struggle with a multitude of participants, tactics and targets, the movement grew out of many motives and has led to monumental change. However, it has also faced reduction from forces that misinterpret its scope in terms of issues and chronology. The movement, while it made national figures, was not a celebrity cause. While not strictly a means of Southern resistance, the movement had direct implications for the South. Similarly, while it reached a peak during a period extending from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, it wasn’t merely a specific phenomenon confined to that time period or to gaining only legal and social rights. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall makes this more direct in her article, “The Long Civil Rights Movement.” She explains that “by confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement” (1234). The movement’s portrayal in literary texts has definitely contributed to creating a master narrative about what went on. In completing this thesis, I’m of the position that re-examining Southern literature for explorations of the causes and concerns of the Civil Rights Movement offers a different way of examining how the movement was internalized and integrated into the American experience.

In the face of the reduction and revision of the movement’s history, fresh scholarship continues to recover many of the nuances of the movement—in particular its economic implications. Before this move, however, authors and activists—and I speak in particular about
William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Martin Luther King, Jr., knowing that others preceding, following and working with them did the same—were making those same links. Even as one might have used the economic more symbolically than another, all, I dare say, recognized its place in the movement. Not only did the economic show up in terms of the figurative debt of slavery, and in the literal broken promises of Reconstruction or crushed finances of the Jim Crow era’s legalized segregation, but it also showed up in the speeches of King, the short stories of O’Connor, and the novels of Faulkner. Each addressed the effect of indebtedness and redress and helped changed the discourse in America about it.

Laced with the imagery of coinage, the elements of money, power and the past call out from the pages of *Intruder in the Dust* and “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” In framing the Civil Rights Movement for their readers, or even for themselves, Faulkner and O’Connor aptly provide sharp insights into how the South would confront the call for black rights. Although viewing the movement from different vantage points—the mass demonstrations, boycotts and legal successes occurring when O’Connor wrote her short story hadn’t fully taken place when Faulkner wrote his novel—the two managed to see some of the same central issues. In his novel *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner frames his conversation about the move for black rights in a text that explores the customs of subservience and cultural guilt. In her short story, “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” O’Connor’s framework concerns eroding white privilege and a critique of white benevolence. In both cases, in examining the intersection of race and rights, each expands the idea of indebtedness and offers a comment on the Civil Rights Movement and reactions to it. Through their texts, the problems of gradualism toward the movement (present in both works) are highlighted at the same rate that moderates and liberals (in O’Connor) are critiqued.
Scholars often find fertile ground to link William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, and in the case of contextualizing the move for civil rights, the writers—both citizens and surveyors of the South—have managed to form yet another tie. *Intruder in the Dust* depicts the making of white guilt from both the personal level and from the collective consciousness. In the novel, Faulkner fictionalizes the interplay between white guilt/white duty in the call for civil rights and racial reconciliation. His white characters have to face the culpability they have in black injustice as well as what they must personally pay toward black redress. As Chick shows, it is only in confronting their stake in this dynamic that real change occurs. O’Connor, in her short story, goes beyond white guilt and the need for whites to make amends to blacks. Her short story “Everything That Rises Must Converge” shows the problems that come when whites feel they have to redeem themselves. As her characters confront their lack of racial uniqueness, O’Connor moves the discussion of black rights to a critique of what occurs when guilt takes a back seat and one has to deal with equality. Reading Faulkner and O’Connor in conversation with one another extends the metaphor of coinage in literature about race relations while placing the Civil Rights Movement within a framework of debts, both historic and personal, come due. Through their works involving coins, collective memory, and confrontation, each adds a distinctive dimension to the discussions about white writers and their views toward black rights. It is a discussion that must, and should, continue as the American literary canon continues to be scrutinized for wide-ranging, cross-cultural viewpoints.
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