

## “Dry September” as a short story

As a Southern writer, Faulkner draws upon the mores and prejudices of his own regional culture to create unforgettable characters and settings for his novels and short stories. "Dry September" clearly shows the horrible miscarriages of justice that prejudice can cause. Although the story revolves around the killing of Will Mayes, the actual act of killing is omitted in order to keep our attention focused on the causes of the violence, and on the mental and physical atmospheres that breed such senseless and random acts of cruelty.

First published in the January 1931 edition of *Scribner's Magazine*, "Dry September" was reprinted in Faulkner's *Collected Stories* (1950) and in the *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (1961). This powerful study of a cultural mentality that promotes rash, swift killings of black men is based on the Southern White Goddess concept. To understand fully the themes and setting of the story, we need to have some knowledge of this White Goddess concept, which applies not only to "Dry September," but also to any Southern story dealing with womanhood and rape, including Faulkner's *Light in August* and Harper Lee's popular *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In its simplest form, the White Goddess concept refers to any "lily-white" Southern woman, who is raised in a society that protects her from any unpleasanties. Because she is white, the culture sets her atop a mythical pedestal, creating an imaginary, protective shield through which the Southern aristocracy lets nothing pass that might endanger — both physically and emotionally — its women. While the Southern white male will allow a woman to fib or tell "white lies" about insignificant matters, he believes adamantly that a Southern lady could never outright lie; even if she did, a Southern gentleman would never confront her with the lie. Instead, it is obligatory that the white man act upon the premise that a Southern woman can tell nothing but the truth. Psychologically, this complete deference to a woman's integrity is based on the belief that she could never be attracted to a black man; consequently, she would never lie about such a matter.

"Dry September," short though it may be, addresses many aspects of this Southern culture. Rather than emphasize the violence of Will Mayes' death, the story focuses on the causes leading up to that violence and the mentality that breeds such monstrous behavior. Closely related to this sadism is a sense of insecurity. For example, John McLendon, the leader of the murderous mob, might be skilled in killing defenseless blacks, but he is anything but successful in his private life. He physically abuses his wife, and his house is described as "a birdcage and almost as small . . ." Unable to face personal failure, he turns to various acts of sadism, whether they be against Will Mayes or his passive, mothering wife.

Faulkner treats many of his characters as victims of various societal forces. Of course, Will Mayes is the most obvious victim. The only character who evokes our complete sympathy, he does nothing to make us believe that he is guilty of raping his accuser, Miss Minnie Cooper. But Miss Minnie is also a victim, a victim of her own sexual frustration. She is driven to desperation by her "idle and empty days": She has no occupation, no social position, and no intellectual interests. Trapped by her advancing age, she fantasizes, hoping that the mere hint of rape will prove her still sexually desirable. McLendon is also somewhat of a victim — if only of the hot and humid weather — but his problem stems from an insecurity that he compensates for with violent actions. Note that every description of McLendon emphasizes his violence: His face is

"furious," and his movements are described as violent and barely under his control. After striking his wife, he tears through the house "ripping off his shirt" and then hunting "furiously" for it.

The story is divided into five sections: Sections I and III show the town's reaction to the rumor that Miss Minnie, a spinster, has been attacked by Will Mayes, a black man; Parts II and IV familiarize us with Miss Minnie's history and give us an inside view of her emotional state; and Section V provides us with a glimpse of McLendon's home life and his rebellious tyranny over his wife.

In this five part structure, with an utmost economy of expression and a refined and interesting style of storytelling "Dry September" sets a new style of short story genre. It is to be noted that the whole action of the story takes place in a single day- beginning from the "Bloody September twilight" of a Saturday in the barbershop to the Midnight of the same day when McLendon returns home after killing Will Mayes. Even the ending of "Dry September", satisfies the criteria of as it leaves the readers in a dilemma to consider what will be the final fate of Mill Minnie or McLendon being parts of the murder of Will Mayes, directly or indirectly. The story has an open ending and successfully shows how one's actions affects others on a day to day basis. Violence only produces more violence. Many movements and periods in history are the causes of society's beliefs and convictions about race relations and individual's positions in society. Faulkner's fiction, "Dry September," also comments on how difficult it was to be a black man in the South to dwell when nearly the entire white population was against the black population. "Dry September" is indeed a passionate story that opens the eyes of society to the problems that lie underneath the surface.