

## TRAGI-COMEDY AND COMI-TRAGEDY IN "PANTALON IN BLACK"

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### *Abstract*

*William Cuthbert Faulkner (1897-1962), the Prominent Representative of Northern Writers, was born in New Albany, Mississippi, the first of four sons to Murray Cuthbert Faulkner and Maud Butler. Faulkner, as an American novelist and short story writer, was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature for his powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel. He wrote works of psychological drama and emotional depth, typically with long serpentine prose and high meticulously-chosen diction, also using ground breaking literary devices such as stream of consciousness, multiple narrations or points of view, and time-shifts within narrative.*

*A close study of Faulkner's works discloses an author who chooses to delve deeply into the complexities of modern man, and considers mixing tones. He does it in his work, "Pantolon in Black", which embodies the spirit of the commedia dell' arte, (Skei 124-125) through these tonal mixtures to describe ways in which a complex man can face the absurdities that life never ceases to deliver. the same theme is revealed through an immense tragedy of Rider, the protagonist, mourning for the sudden, unexplained death of his wife Mannie, Rider, distorted with grief, buries her in an almost violent way.*

**Keywords:** absurdities, complex-man, distorted with grief, embodies, immense tragedy, protagonist, tragi-comedy, violent way.

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William Cuthbert Faulkner (1897-1962), the Prominent Representative of Northern Writers was born in New Albany, Mississippi, the first of four sons to Murry Cuthbert Faulkner and Maud Butler. From the early 1920s to the outbreak of World War II, when Faulkner left for California, he published 13 novels and numerous short stories. This body of work formed the basis of his reputation and led to him being awarded the Nobel Prize at age 52. This prodigious output, mainly driven by an obscure writer's need for money, includes his most celebrated novels such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Faulkner was also a prolific writer of short stories.

Where romantic comedy says: these aggressions can be transcended, and realistic comedy says: these aggressions will be punished, tragic-comedy. . . says these aggressions can neither be transcended nor brought to heel, they are human nature, they are life, they rule the world. The peculiar, unparalleled ruthlessness of the genre suggests a wrestling match with no holds barred (Bentley 342).

In these few words Eric Bentley, an eminent literary critic, points out the power, the purpose, and the effect of mixing tones in literature. Comedy alone, Bentley argues, creates an unreal world—either where man transcends evil or where evil men face certain punishment. Tragedy alone, Bentley continues, excludes most of man's experiences because of its emphasis on "Beauty, Nobility, Heroism, Higher Truth (Bentley 338). Therefore, when an author chooses to delve deeply into the complexities of modern man, he should consider mixing tones, as William Faulkner does in *"Pantaloons in Black"*. In this comic-tragedy one can see how Faulkner uses tonal mixtures to describe ways in which a complex man can face the absurdities that life never ceases to deliver.

Written in 1940 and sold to Harper's for \$400, *"Pantaloons in Black"* embodies the spirit of the commedia dell'arte, (Skei 124-125) through many readers miss the story's comic moments because they find themselves wrapped up in the immense tragedy of Rider, the protagonist. Mourning the sudden unexplained death of his wife Mannie, Rider, distorted with grief, buries her in the almost violent way. After all, she has caused him to change, to become a better man. After refusing to go home with his aunt and uncle, his surrogate parents, he returns home where he sees Manne's ghost and then to the sawmill where he works like a mad man, throwing an

enormous log in a daring display of physical skill-one showing his desire to die-for he cannot live without his Mannie. After failing to kill himself at work, he runs wildly on to a bootlegger where he fights to keep a gallon of moonshine. After another confrontation with his aunt, he rushes to dice game where he tangles with Birdsong, a crooked white man, whom he kills with a razor. Captured by the law, Rider's story, as seen through his eyes, ends. The deputy sheriff, a myopic, prejudiced man, tells the rest of Rider's story to his extremely bored wife. Though Rider has made no attempt to escape, the deputy tells us, Rider tears apart the cell, only to be beaten by members of a black chain gang-all for naught-for the next day, persons unknown take him from the jail and lynch him. Such a plot summery emphasizes the tragic elements, but it hardly captures the essence of the story, for the comic undertones make all the difference.

The title gives the reader the first hint. Juxtaposed with black, the colour of death, tragedy and the deprived race in *Go Down Moses*, a pantaloon (or pantaloons), a stock character in *comedia dell' arte*, stands as Faulkner's first notice of absurdity (Mobley 106). Rider represents this absurdity, this chaos, for as a fool he must face the vicissitudes of life. Virtually all he can do is laugh for life allows little else. A strong, two-hundred-pound, six-foot man, he should face his wife's death with resignation, but he cannot for she has meant too much to him. After all, she saved him from self-destruction. A successful man, he makes "good money" working at a sawmill, "the head of the timber gang itself", a gang that moves "a third again as much timber between sunup and sundown as any other moved" (Faulkner133). Because of her he has, after their marriage, given up his Saturday night and Sunday dice and whiskey. He states, "Ah'm thu wid all dat" (133). After their marriage he has rented a cabin, fixed it up, and built a fire on the hearth as his Uncle Lucas Beauchamp had done, a symbol of the permanence of the family and marriage. But because of a disease or an accident (the story never says), Rider finds himself suddenly, absurdly without a wife. He has, through his own discipline, his own small choices, his own volition, changed his life to keep the fire on the hearth going and now life has cheated him of the woman who has made the difference. Such a situation seems like a cruel joke. In the *commedia dell arte* one of the principal sources of comedy is mime, acting without words (Mobley 910, and the story makes great use of mime. In the opening scene he flings dirt on to her coffin, using an implement which resembled a "toy shovel a child plays with at the shore, its half cubic foot of flung dirt no more than the light gout of sand the child's shovel would have flung" (Faulkner 133). If one thinks of the wasted energy, the mad swings, and the little dirt, he

cannot help but laugh as he will when sees that grave lies in a barren garbage heap full of "shards of pottery and broken bottles and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch. . . " Here lies the body of a good woman, a woman who means a lot to her husband, ironically, tragically buried in a trash heap. Rider's aunt, his surrogate mother, then intrudes into his mourning, and as Lemon points out, tries to get him to return to his childhood and come home with her (Lemon 431). She tells him, "You come home and eat", meaning her home, but he has a home, one of his own, one with a fire on the hearth. He replies, "Ah'm go an home" (Faulkner 132). Later, she will call him Spoot, his childhood name, in a preposterous attempt to bring him back to childhood.

Humorous mime also underlies the tragedy throughout the story when Rider eats. His table manners would definitely not meet Emily Post's approval. As he:

. . . raised the cold and glutinous Pease to his mouth. the congealed and lifeless mass seemed to become on contact with his lips. Not even warmed from mouth-heat pease and spoon spattered and rang upon the plate; his chair crashed backward and he was standing, feeling the muscles of his jaw beginning to drag his mouth open, tugging upward the top of his head (Faulkner 137).

In the midst of such grief, he presents a comical picture as food spatters and his chair overturns, but cold, lifeless, not even warmed represent the appalling world in which he exists. After he leaves home, he goes to the sawmill where he aggressively forces a sympathetic fellow to give him his lunch. sitting on the ground, Rider eats:

. . . cramming the food into his mouth with his hands, wolfing it-Pease again, also gelid and cold, a fragment of yesterday's Sunday fried chicken, a few rough chunks of this morning's fried side meat, a biscuit the size of child's cap-indiscriminate, tasteless (Faulkner139).

In this case he eats what looks like garbage in the manner of an animal, a wolf, again a funny scene if one thinks of the mime involved. Then his aunt's husband puts in an appearance, carrying a peach pie:

He did not answer, bent forward a little, his elbows on his knees, holding the pie in both hands, wolfing at it, the syrupy filling smearing and trickling down his chin, blinking rapidly as he chewed, the whites of his eyes covered a little more by the creeping red (Faulkner 140).

Again he eats like a hungry wolf, blinking, as sticky syrup trickles over him. But the tragic remains omnipresent as his eyes show his sincere sorrow. The picture Faulkner paints shows us a

man who comically acts like an animal to the casual human observer but who has a depth of feeling most cannot and do not have. While Rider eats in a disordered, chaotic manner like the world in which he finds himself, he still retains a spiritual love well above the instinctual pull exhibited by animals. With the meal the uncle brings a message to put his faith in god-a potential sense of order-in the morass surrounding him. But as he stands there dripping with pie juice, Rider answers:

Whut faith and trust? Whut Mannie ever done ter Him? Whut Je wanter come messin wid me and? (Faulkner 140).

The absurd universe emerges in his response, for Rider understands that "bad things happen to good people" and he rejects a God who allows such to happen. Freud points out in "Jocks and the Comic" that comedy makes people "contemptible to deprive him of his claim to dignity and authority" (254). Certainly the humour inherent in watching Rider eat could deprive him of that claim, but it does not, for Faulkner has mixed the comic with the tragic, and the latter shows us the black man's depth, complexity, and hopelessness and allows him to retain his dignity.

And he does it again when he tries his next comic stunt. In this case he takes a huge log from the truck into his hands and "tosse[s] it onto the skid way." "It was as if the irrational and inanimate wood had invested, mesmerized the man with some of its own primal inertia" (Faulkner 141). Certainly his throw, this amazing physical accomplishment, caused each of his peers to think that "hit gonter to kill him". to them his toss represented the irrational, the suicidal, the primal urge to return to dust. But instead of killing himself, he succeeds, ironically, in moving the log which "seem[s] to leap suddenly backward over his head of its own volition, spinning, crashing, and thundering down the incline". There he stands in the midst of a comic mime with the chaos of the universe moving around him. As we laugh lightly in amazement at his fear, we feel the disorder around him and shed a tear, for we can guess what will come.

Next he runs madly, like a clown, to a bootlegger, a white man, who refuses to sell him a gallon but offers to him a pint. Rider again acts irrationally, insisting that he has purchased the jug and taking it by force amidst some racial slurs from the bootlegger who exhibits a paternalistic, superior attitude-one hardly logical for an outlaw (Faulkner 142-43). Now drunk himself, Rider fits into the wild universe surrounding him as he talks madly to the jug: "Come on now. You always claim you's a better man den me. Come on now. Prove it" (Faulkner 143). As Professor Kinney points out,

"In his high and raw emotional state, Rider connects the white man's absolute control of moonshine with the failure of the white man's religion to comfort him despite his uncle's and aunt's promises. He then connects both with the white man whose dominance in throwing the dice and in organizing the game seems especially contrived (Kinney 109-110)."

Acting irrationally, filled with drink which "flowed sold and cold with fire," Rider feels "poisoned" by a snake bite, original sin, his "faint, frail voice already lost in the night's infinitude. . ." (Faulkner 144). Rider realises his own insignificance, his own inability to cope with the absurdities surrounding him—a world controlling him and his race with illegal liquor and crooked crap games. In the midst of his drunken realization, he meets his aunt who appeals to him to take to god. He responds in a logical manner:

Efn He God, Ah don't needs to tole Him. Efn He God, He already know hit. Awright Hyar Ah is. Leff Him come down Hyar and do me some good (Faulkner 146).

God, he will accept, only if God will come now and help him, and he little knows chance exists that will happen. Then, in a totally irrational, totally absurd way he forces his way into a crap game, run by a white man who has cheated the blacks of their hard-earned money for fifteen years. The muted voices, the mute click and scatter of the dice he hears before he enters to find seven or eight people playing a ridiculous game which they can never win, setting up the central metaphor of the story—that life is a crooked crap shoot. The characters sitting around—from the timber gang, the mill crew, and the night watchman—represent comic stock characters from the commedia dell'arte—probably the zanies (buffoons) (McGraw-Hill 399)—as they lounge around the circle, losing their money like fools. Though the story does not describe their actions, in keeping with their role, they mime their actions, never talking. To their centre come Rider, playing the pantaloon, another fool who, according to Skei can rip off masks and rage at other (125). As he raged over his wife's grave, at his uncle and aunt, and at the bootlegger, he now strips off Birdsong's mask. Birdsong's name, proves comic in itself, for he does not represent the natural harmony it suggests. Causing a pair of loaded dice to fall to the floor, Rider, in his apparent lunacy, grasps the white man's wrist. Rider, the comic fool who has ranted and raved throughout the story, has unmasked the cheat before he kills him with a razor (Faulkner 147-9). In this maze of violence, so typical of comedy and farce, the protagonist has killed a racist cheat, the stuff a tragedian can use as well, but this story does not turn to tragedy but to a comi-tragedy. Throughout the entire scene Rider has smiled, like a fool, who adapts to his absurd surroundings.

The last portion of the story, seen through the eyes of a racist deputy sheriff, tells us that the Birdsong family and their friends--all good voters needed to select the highly ineffectual Maydew--have hanged Rider, stolen him from jail, and lynched him, from the bell-rope in a Negro schoolhouse (Faulkner 149). They have done so to impress the blacks--all of whom they consider stupid--(though they themselves are the real fools), that they need to learn a lesson, hence their use of the school. The deputy, who tells the story to his indifferent wife, cannot understand:

In damn niggers. I swear to god fray, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because Why? Because they aren't human (Faulkner 149).

so religious that he must use the minced form, god fray, for God, he still cannot love his fellow man, especially if they happen to be black. He says they resemble a herd of "wild buffaloes". And as he recounts his story of the day's activities, he makes Rider look like the fool the little indicates. He criticises him for burying his wife in the way he does, for not taking the day off from work, for leaving work when he does (a slight contradiction), for throwing logs around "like matches", for playing in a game he knows to be crooked (why hasn't the law closed it?), for not running off to Tennessee (He and Mayhew do not want to be bothered). Of course, such a comic fool could never understand the depth of the other fool--the ranting Rider who goes to jail willingly, yet absurdly insists on bearing free. Because of his strength he tears his cell part and breaks off the door. Then the sheriff uses the road gang (made up of black convicts) to subdue him. In a fight right out of commedia dell arte:

. . . . a big mass of nigger heads and arms and legs boiling around on the floor and even then Kethcham says every now and then a nigger would come flying out and sailing through the air across the room, straddled out like a flying squirrel and with his eyes sticking out like car headlights. . . . (Faulkner 154).

In this fight, representing the chaos of life, the absurdity of man's existence, the silliness of man's struggle to survive, Rider, in the true comi-tragic fashion, can do nothing but laugh and cry:

. . . until at last they had down and Ketcham went in a began peeling away niggers until he could see him laying there under the pile of them, laughing, with tears big as glass marbles running across his face and down past his ears making a kind of popping sound on the floor I like somebody dropping bird eggs, laughing and laughing and saying, "Hit look lack Ah Can't quite thinking" (Faulkner 154).

Rider laughs because he knows the absurdity of his condition--his wife's death, his inability to see her only in death, his enslavement to white moonshiners and gamblers, a law which protects only whites and which cannot understand the human condition, his physical strength and his inability to cope with his problems. Around him he sees hopelessness and despair: his only response can be laughter: in the fight he goes down thinking, for he understands his condition, and he takes the only way out. In order to live with his Mannie, he must die such is the ultimate absurdity that man faces. Rider's laughter and tears make the readers feel deeply about him because we see him as an absurd hero, especially when we compare him with the insensitive, racist deputy who understands nothing and his bored wife who has cheated in a game of rook and who now wants to hurry to a movie where she can lose herself and forgot the horror in which she lives. The ending, with its mixture of comic and tragic, makes the story more powerful than ever. Martin Esslin points to commedia del 'arte as a forbear of the absurd because it deals with the "futility of human existence that can be relieved only by love and the ability to see oneself as absurd", (239). He points to the "stupid simpleton (the deputy sheriff perhaps) who cannot understand the meaning of the most common terms and becomes entangled in endless semantic speculations and misunderstandings," (235). Definitely Faulkner makes good use of this ancient form to combine the comic and tragic tones.

In "Pantaloons in Black", Faulkner successfully mixes the comic and tragic to show he absurdity man faces. Rider cannot hold that any relief will come from the troubles that he as a human being faces. He and the people around him will continue to suffer from illness, injury, death, fraud, slander, prejudice, irrationality, loneliness, and hope. Nothing can protect him. Love might help for a moment but only for a moment, for, as Rider learns, the person one loves may die. Rider, of course, finds himself in a worse condition, for he must work from his blackness, one of the worst handicaps man can have. The best that any man can do: He can become a clown of life who rolls with the punches and laughs at his own tragedy-a devastating position. As Bentley writes:

Comedy with gloom which ends badly and tragedy shot through with comedy that makes the outlook still bleaker holds out the only hope we can accept (353).

Faulkner's story seems accurate, for Rider, mired in tragedy, learns to laugh even as he cries. As Grimwood argues, "Pantaloons in Black refers at a basic level to Faulkner himself" and "his guilty need to revise his own literary misperception of the Negro"(227-28). Fortunately for the



American Reader, Faulkner felt this guilt for in working through the absurdities of his own life, he gives us an understanding of our own.

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