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“Intruder in the Dust”: Paradox of Morality and Corruption in William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*

Throughout history, mankind’s misconceived perceptions of themselves have often spiraled them downwards towards a path of arrogance and pride where they, in a rather narcissistic manner, position themselves superior to others for their own advantage and well being. This idea of corruption amongst themselves due to any preconceived social factors prevalent within their societies, such as an established social hierarchy, can, and have, convinced most to believe that the framework of their moral principles is not only justifiable but will allow them to grow and prosper within their society. This ironic paradox, that a man can be corrupted by his own moral principles is a prevalent theme and ideal present throughout William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*. This novel explores the idea of the growth and development of a young boy as he adjusts to his society, one which he unfortunately comes to understand has a certain notion and hatred towards those of color, and that by definition this boy, although just a boy, is superior to another man, no matter his age, wealth or character. Such engraved moral principles are indeed what leads to this young boy corrupted sense of perspective of his society. In Faulkner’s *Intruder in the dust*, this ironic paradox does not only occur to this young boy, but occurs to his uncle Gavin as well as the southern Mississippi society as a whole. The social hierarchy present with this young boys society corrupts those who perceive themselves as moral people.

The first glance at the paradox of morality in William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the dust* can be observed through the character Chick Mullins, who is a boy confused of the social norm within his society as he adjusts in ways to which he understands given the influence the social hierarchy would have on a boy of his nature. When Chick, Edmonds boy and Aleck sander, who was a boy of color and one of Chicks closest friends, went hunting down by a willow creek, Chick had slipped and fell into the ice-cold water. As he scrounged around trying to pull himself out the water, he suddenly grabbed on to a stick whom he assumed to be either Aleck sander or Edmonds boy on the other end but was rather shocked when he had found out, or rather, had been confronted by the presence of a black man, Lucas. Lucas had escorted the three back to his residence, and had provided them with food and a fresh set of clothes. However, when Chick offered to pay Lucas for his help and accommodations in a manner that was rather condescending, Lucas had refused and had replied “What’s that for” (Pg. 15). At that moment, Faulkner had described Chicks sudden outrage as follows:

“For another eternity and only the hot dead moveless blood until at last it ran to rage so that at least he could bear the shame: and watched his palm turn over not flinging the coins but spurning them downward ringing onto the bare floor, bouncing and one of the nickels even rolling away in a long swooping curve with a dry minute sound like the scurry of a small mouse: and then his voice: “Pick it up”” (Pg. 15)

As Chicks blood boils, his sudden perspective of this man and his preconceived understanding of the social hierarchy had suddenly been turned on itself as he replied in an outrage, throwing the money on to the floor and demanding Lucas to pick it up. Chick is a boy who again abides by his own moral principles, the very ones taught to him by his Uncle Gavin Stevens. He respects his society and respects those amongst him including those of color, such as Aleck sander but as long as the principle, that can

very well be deemed as the cornerstone of western civilization, holds, that being the status of black people on the established social hierarchy. Once this order is disrupted in any way shape or form, it is but a surprise that a young boy, who has already adjusted himself to understand that his society functions with such a principle, would reply in an outrage as he isn't rather angry at this man but afraid of what he represents, a stance against injustice and to possibly disrupt this established social norm, a hierarchy which states that Lucas isn't a man that is superior to Chick but rather a man that is inferior to him. This ironic paradox is one of the central themes of William Faulkner's *Intruder the dust*, that being that people like Chick become corrupted by their own moral principles because Chick himself despises the feeling that he may forever be in debt to a man like Lucas, a black man, who by definition should be a man that is inferior to Chick not a man who is superior to him in any way shape or form.

Evidence to show Chicks corrupted notion against black people due to his understanding and adaptation to the established social norms present in southern Mississippi occurs when he observes Lucas's character, that being the nature of this man and how he upholds himself to function within a society which may very well despise his existence but he seems to go about admiring theirs in his own unique manner, but digressing no further when Chick understands the nobility, wealth, dignity, honor and respect this man, that again by definition should be a man that encompasses anything but such qualities, he suddenly is bestowed by this feeling of unease. He feels as if there is a chip on his shoulder that he would do anything to get rid of, but every now and then he would often take a moment to contemplate over it, to understand it, and why time and time again it defies the laws of society. For example, the following quotation is with reference to an observation Chick had to the interaction between Lucas and Edmonds:

"At last he saw Edmonds and gave them to him to deliver Christmas morning. But that merely discharged (with doubled interest) the seventy cents; there still remained the dead monstrous heatless disc which hung nightly in the black abyss of the rage and impotence: *If he would just be a nigger first, just for one second, one little infinitesimal second*" (Pg. 22)

It is clear that after Chick had observed the dignity and loyalty that Lucas had despite what his preconceived notions would say otherwise, he had to come to terms with the fact that this man, and his very character, had defied an entire social construct, an entire social ideal. And so thus Chick replies by expressing his anger for why this man couldn't just be the man that his society would otherwise illustrate him to be in a few short words, or in a six lettered word that would rather just constraint him and his character in a nutshell, and paint him as any other black man. Chick was aggravated and agitated by why this man couldn't be inferior to him, because by definition he should be, or rather must be. This engraved moral principle that fixates those of color to a position submerged within the social hierarchy and this ironic paradox of the corruption of a young boy based on his moral principles has an apparent existence within Chick in William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*.

Gavin Stevens is a character in William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* who plays the role of Chicks Uncle as well as his moral guide and encompasses him on a path for which he believes to be the morally justifiable path but inevitably blinds him therein. Gavin Stevens was a well known lawyer as well, and who was also oddly enough assigned to Lucas Beauchamp's case after he was accused of the murder of a white man. However, it is rather immediately evident and clear that Gavin has no will, no desire and no reason to represent such a man because of his own unique perspective and moral principles to which he abides by and to which he has conveyed onto to Lucas. Gavin is not a man who upholds himself to the dignity and honor a lawyer would, but rather upholds himself to his pride and position as a man of importance and wealth, as any other man of his nature would when contemplating over their position amongst the social hierarchy. He paints any man of color with the same brush, a brush coated

with colors resonating with arrogance and hatred towards those of color. "I don't defend murderers who shoot people in the/ back" (Pg. 58). These were some of Gavin's initial words to Lucas in their exchange at the prison. It is evidently clear that before Gavin's had any apparent evidence of the nature of the crime or the nature of this man, he automatically and indicatively jumps to a biased assumption that he did indeed murder this man and that it would be rather dissonance with his moral principles if hadn't. This is indeed what corrupts this lawyer, the fact that his pride and arrogance to those of color based on his own socially constructed ideals and engraved moral principles is what inevitably corrupts this man when he eventually realizes that Lucas really was innocent.

In William Faulkner's *Intruder in the dust* it is quite evident that Chicks society as a whole represents a society that is corrupted by their own socially constructed ideals as well as their own moral principles to which they uphold themselves to. They reek of arrogance and pride towards those of color due their preconceived notion of themselves and their position on the established social hierarchy, that of their vast superiority to those of color. Their pride and arrogance become a mere symbol of the weapons they use to convey their hatred towards those of color. This is quite evident when Gavin's himself informs Lucas of the heard of people waiting outside the county jail, waiting for their chance to break in and murder this man who they have evidently grown vast sense of hatred towards, without even really understanding who he is but rather jumping to a merely judgmental, arrogant and blindfolded assumption that Lucas had to have murdered this man, again to them it would make all the sense in the world for him to have done such a thing.

"He's 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. Only a nigger could kill a man, let alone shoot him in the back, and then sleep like a baby as soon as he found something flat enough to lie down on" (Pg. 57)

This expert was uttered by the man who was the head the county jail, it is evident that this man is a clear example of a man corrupted by his own notions against those of color, and would much rather find it comfortable to affix Lucas to a six lettered word that would allow his world to be complete, allow everything to make sense and would allow him to understand it once again. This man would find it troubling, find it rather shameful for himself to ever fathom or believe that Lucas had not killed that man, because to his own admission, only a man of color could kill another man, let alone shoot him in the back. However, this ironic paradox once again reveals itself towards the very end of the novel, when the entire county had realised that Lucas truly was innocent, which followed by the statement made by Gavin Stevens: "They were not running from Crawford Gowrie or Lucas Beauchamp either. They were running from themselves. They ran home to hide their heads under the bedclothes from their own shame." (Pg. 198) Here the county is confronted by their arrogant, shameful and pitiful assumptions they had against Lucas all along. They are confronted by the fact that their ideological moral compass was nothing but a false premise, that had misguided them all along to think that this man, or rather to think that all men of color, would commit such a crime while being shadowed by the fact that it was a man not of color, one of their own in fact, that had committed such a crime. How the tables turn when an entire county is left speechless, perhaps some in reverence, as a result by but a single man. This recurring ironic paradox, of the corruption of a man based on his misconceived notion of his moral perception is a unique fragment and cornerstone of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the dust*.

The social hierarchy present with this Chick Mallinson's society corrupts those who perceive themselves as moral people. This ironic paradox is one of Faulkner's central themes and recurrences throughout his novel, and has proven itself to be quite powerful when studying the idea of how mankind can sometimes deem themselves as moral, begin to want to prosper and grow, but prevent themselves

from doing so due to their ever so engraved sense of arrogance and superiority they have had to those of color. This corrupted sense of perspective, which has been deemed by these characters as a law of nature, is what eventually leads them astray and is what lead to their walk of shame as they suddenly realize this law of nature is flawed, and that an entire socially constructed ideal against black people has turned in on itself. What Faulkner illustrated was a stance against injustice, but not through a stance as a political intervention but a stance that took no more than a single man, to prove an entire county wrong, and to show them just how corrupted their notions against black people were. His stubbornness and persistence allowed them to realize that one day, Black people will be deemed as equals and this social construct will eventually dismiss itself. Ironically, it was Gavin who realized this in the latter part of the novel when he stated:

“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 anywhen and anywhere a white man can and send his children to the same school anywhere the white man’s children go and travel anywhere the white man travels as the white man does it.” (Pg. 121)

To conclude, the social hierarchy present with this Chick Mallinson’s society corrupts those who perceive themselves as moral people.