Dry September

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

Born in New Albany, Mississippi in 1897, William Faulkner grew up in nearby Oxford. Though he was a bright child and had already learned to read before starting school, Faulkner did not graduate from high school and, after enrolling in the University of Mississippi in 1919, dropped out of college in 1920. Inspired by the history of Mississippi and the stories his family told him, Faulkner began writing poetry and fiction. He was particularly influenced by his mother, grandmother, and longtime African American nanny, the experiences of whom informed his writing's frequent dissection of sexuality and race. By 1925, he had moved to New Orleans, Louisiana, where he wrote and published his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*. Faulkner married Estelle Oldham, whom he had dated as a young man in Oxford, in 1929. He was able to buy them a house in Oxford, which he named Rowan Oak. During the 1920s, he published a number of novels and stories, but struggled to make a living as a writer; in 1932, he and Oldham moved to Culver City, California, where Faulkner had a successful career as a Hollywood screenwriter until the late 1950s. A two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for his novels *A Fable* and *The Reivers*, Faulkner also won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949 but was distinctly unhappy with the fame winning entailed; Faulkner used some of his prize money to establish what would eventually become the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, which exists to this day as a prestigious award for living American writers. William Faulkner died of a heart attack in 1962, at the age of 64, having published 13 novels and numerous short stories.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first half of the twentieth century was a time of slow economic development and rapid social change in the American South. Slowly rebuilding from the destruction of the Civil War, the southern economy still relied heavily on the labor of African Americans, who only decades before had achieved freedom from slavery and were still considered second-class citizens by the majority white population. Unable to vote, often subject to extreme violence, and denied access quality education, many black men and women moved north in what was known as the Great Migration. The southern economy further suffered during the Great Depression, which was compounded by drought conditions that lasted from 1934 to 1939, leaving hundreds of thousands of Americans without jobs throughout this primarily agricultural region.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In addition to being thematically similar to "Dry September," many of the short stories in Faulkner's 1931 collection *These 13* are set in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi—a fictional setting that closely resembles the area where the author grew up and which suffers the racial and cultural division that plagued much of the American South in the first half of the twentieth century. Some of Faulkner's most famous novels, including *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Light in August* (1932), are also set in Mississippi. The character Henry Hawkshaw—a voice of conscious in "Dry September"—is the protagonist of another Faulkner short story, titled "Hair." In "Hair" readers learn that the barber's real name is Henry Stribling, but he is given the name Hackshaw, slang for "detective," due to his mysterious nature. Not unlike "Dry September," "Hair" unravels a mystery about its protagonist through hearsay and rumor, leading readers to wonder what can really be known about others' private lives. The Southern Renaissance period in American literature, of which "Dry September is a part, encompassed a number of notable short story collections, such as *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* by Flannery O'Connor and *A Curtain of Green* and *The Wide Net and Other Stories* by Eudora Welty.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dry September
- **When Written:** 1931
- **Where Written:** Oxford, MS
- **When Published:** Published in *Scribner's* magazine and in short story collection *These 13*, both in 1931
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Southern Renaissance
- **Genre:** Modernism and Southern Renaissance literature
- **Setting:** Jefferson, Mississippi
- **Climax:** The angry mob takes Will Mayes to the kilns to murder him
- **Antagonist:** John McLendon
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Faulkner's 2(2) Cents. In 1987, William Faulkner was honored with his likeness on a 22-cent postage stamp, presumably due in part to his service as Postmaster at the University of Mississippi. Faulkner did not enjoy his position in the postal service, however, and resigned in 1923, noting, "I will be damned if I propose to be at the beck and all of every itinerant

scoundrel who has two cents to invest in a postage stamp."

PLOT SUMMARY

On a **hot** and dry evening in September, a group of men is gathered in a barbershop in Jefferson, Mississippi, discussing the rumor that a black man, Will Mayes, has attacked Minnie Cooper, an unmarried white woman. The barber, Henry Hawkshaw, attempts to convince the other men that Mayes is innocent, but the others angrily argue that a white woman must be telling the truth. The war hero John McLendon enters the shop, a **gun** protruding from his pocket, to round up a group of men to find Mayes. As the men leave with McLendon, Hawkshaw decides to follow them and try to stop them from hurting Mayes.

Minnie Cooper, who lives with her aging mother and aunt, is nearly forty. She spends her days sitting on her porch in the mornings, window shopping with her friends in the afternoons, and at the moving pictures in the evenings. Though she was an attractive young woman, she never married. She dated a widowed bank clerk for a time, but he left her when he got a job in Memphis. According to local gossip, Minnie regularly drank whiskey she bought from the clerk at the soda fountain, and had in the past accused another man of watching her undress.

Hawkshaw finds the men on their way to find Will Mayes and joins them, still intending to keep the others from causing harm. The men arrive at the **ice** factory where Mayes works, drag him out, handcuff and beat him, and then put him in the back seat of the car next to Hawkshaw. Mayes attempts to talk to the men, maintaining his innocence, but the men ignore him as they drive out to an abandoned area of town. Feeling sick, Hawkshaw begs McLendon to stop the car and let him out, to no avail. He finally decides to open the door while the car is moving and jump out. Hawkshaw then walks along the road, hiding in a ditch when the car passes him on its way back to town.

In the meantime, Minnie is preparing to go to the movies for the evening. She is suddenly the center of attention: her friends come to help her dress and press her for more information about the crime, and the men downtown watch her and whisper about her and Mayes. The news has spread that McLendon and his gang have retaliated against Mayes for his presumed crime, and it is then that everyone notices that there are no black men in the square that evening. When Minnie goes in to watch the film, she has a fit of uncontrollable laughter, and is escorted out of the theater. Her friends take her home, undress her, put her into bed with an ice pack, and call for the doctor.

McLendon returns home at midnight. His wife has stayed awake, which angers McLendon and leads to a confrontation between the couple. McLendon abuses his wife verbally, then grabs her shoulder and throws her onto the chair. He walks to the bed, undresses, puts his gun on the bedside table, and attempts to wipe the sweat from his body.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Henry Hawkshaw – Henry Hawkshaw, also known as Hawk, is one of the barbers of Jefferson, a mild-mannered white man. The barber shop is one of the central gathering places for men in the town, and "Dry September" opens with Hawkshaw discussing the rumors about Minnie Cooper and Will Mayes with his fellow barbers and their customers. Hawkshaw vehemently defends Mayes, showing himself to be principled and rational in contrast to the blind racial hatred of the other men in the shop. He argues that he knows Mayes and believes that he would not attack a white woman, and that Minnie is a middle-aged unmarried woman who might be prone to exaggeration. This discussion leads to a confrontation between Hawk and John McLendon, in which McLendon questions Hawk's virtue as a white man. Eventually, the other men leave with McLendon in an angry mob, intent on finding Mayes and killing him. Hawkshaw reluctantly joins the men in an attempt to keep them from hurting Mayes, but he ends up jumping from a moving vehicle and walking back to town in defeat. Hawkshaw's trajectory illustrates the near-impossibility of combating racial hate with reason, as well as the loneliness of dissent in small-town America.

Will Mayes – Will Mayes is a black man who lives in Jefferson, works at the **ice** factory, and has been accused of sexually assaulting a white woman, Minnie Cooper. It is unclear whether the rumor is true, and Mayes seems genuinely confused when confronted with an angry mob of white men who are out to kill him. Henry Hawkshaw knows Will, vouches for his character, and believes he is innocent; there will be no way to find out the truth, however, because the men in the barber shop have already decided on his guilt. As a black man in Jefferson, Mayes's word is worth next to nothing, and not a single person bothers to ask him about the incident. This character evokes a good deal of sympathy: he is diligently working at the ice factory on a Saturday night, and when the mob of men drags him out to the car, he maintains a deferential manner right up until he is **handcuffed** and beaten. Even the one man who believes him to be innocent is unable to help him; as Mayes calls to Hawkshaw for help, the barber jumps from the car to escape the imminent violence. Mayes's implied death is emblematic of the powerlessness of black men in this society, and in fact the rumor of his murder sends such a strong message to the black men of Jefferson that they are completely absent from public areas of town that evening.

Minnie Cooper – Minnie Cooper is an unmarried white woman in her late thirties who may or may not have been sexually

assaulted by a black man, Will Mayes. There is no proof that anything happened between the two, and some people in Jefferson doubt her story, as this is not the first time she has had a "man-scare." Minnie has been virtually abandoned by this society, due to her low class and lack of a husband. Though she was attractive as a young girl, she but was passed over by the boys in town in favor of women with a higher social status. She briefly dated the clerk at the local bank, but that did not end well, as he moved to Memphis without Minnie. After that, she settled in with her aging mother and aunt, and had little to do to occupy her time. According to others in Jefferson, Minnie drank whiskey on a regular basis and had accused a man of watching her undress, both of which are seen as desperate attempts to attract attention. The rumor involving Will Mayes makes Minnie the center of attention, whether or not that was her intent in the first place.

John McLendon – John McLendon is described as having commanded troops in France and is considered a war hero and man of action around Jefferson. There is no mention of his current occupation, and it appears that it does not matter much, as he is entirely defined by his wartime heroism. He lives in Jefferson with his wife, and while he is publicly viewed as a man of valor, within the walls of his home, McLendon is verbally and physically abusive with his wife, embodying the hypocrisy at the center of "Dry September." McLendon bursts into the barber shop at the beginning of the story in order to recruit men to help him retaliate against Will Mayes for what he may or may not have done to Minnie Cooper. While some of the other men, including Henry Hawkshaw, suggest that they should gather facts and go to the authorities, McLendon questions their reputations as white men tasked with upholding the status quo. He gathers a mob of angry men and, with the **gun** he has tucked in his waistband, abducts Mayes and brings him to a secluded area to kill him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

McLendon's Wife – McLendon's wife appears only at the end of the story, having waited up for her husband as he returns from ostensibly murdering Will Mayes. Enraged that she has done so, McLendon verbally and physically abuses her.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

VIGILANTE JUSTICE

"Dry September" is set in the South during the 1920s, when black men were often subjected to violence in retaliation for any perceived offense, often without proof or due process. The story begins with a group of white men discussing the rumored sexual attack or insult of Minnie Cooper, a white woman, by a black man, Will Mayes. The mob of men ignore the protestations of local barber Henry Hawkshaw, who is convinced that Mayes is innocent, and instead decide to abduct and assault Mayes that very evening. This form of vigilante justice, very common during this period in American history, is based on prejudice and racialized anger rather than evidence—and, it follows, is not really justice at all.

Faulkner's story specifically exemplifies the ways in which whites used violence not to impose actual justice on society, but to maintain their own social dominance over blacks in the South. None of the men in the barber shop know what happened to Minnie Cooper, nor do they care about the details. In fact, when one man suggests that the group figure out if Mayes is actually guilty, the mob's self-appointed leader McLendon responds, "What the hell difference does it make?" Their intention is not to indict and then punish Mayes for his actions, but to send a message to the black men of Jefferson and to reinforce the social structure of the South in the pre-Civil Rights era. To that end, though the assault on Mayes is not described directly in the story, men in the main square spread the news that Mayes "went on a little trip." This vague rumor serves as a cautionary tale to the other black men of the town, that the white men are not "going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it." Their threat is successful: as Minnie Cooper walks to the movie theater that evening, there was "not a Negro on the square. Not one."

Beyond highlighting the prejudiced nature of vigilante "justice," the story also reveals how such vigilantism can rob people of individual, rational thought. While McLendon is ultimately able to rally two cars of men to attack Mayes, there is initially some degree of doubt among those assembled in the barbershop regarding Mayes's guilt. A few call for facts and evidence, with one attempting to calm the others down by noting that "We'll get the facts in plenty of time to act." Another questions the allegations themselves, asking, "Did it really happen?" Even as McLendon is able to persuade nearly all of the men in the barber shop to join him, many of them continue to express shame or discomfort about the decision. As some men get up to leave the shop, the others "sat uncomfortable, not looking at one another, then one by one they rose and joined." The fact that the men go through with things despite doubts about the justice of their actions further points to the dangers of the mob mentality inculcated by vigilantism.

Henry Hawkshaw, the barber, stands out as a man of reason and integrity. He alone explicitly defends Mayes and argues

against taking action, yet his words have little effect on the angry mob. Hawkshaw is certain from the beginning that Mayes is innocent, and is steadfast in his defense, noting, "I know Will Mayes… I know Miss Minnie Cooper, too." This puts him in direct conflict with the prejudiced, vengeful McLendon, highlighting the contrast between the men to the point that they're described as looking "like men of different races." Hawkshaw decides to find the men after they leave the barber shop, presumably to convince them not to hurt Mayes, but he, too, is quickly swept up in the action. His repeated protests of "Listen, boys" become little more than background noise, as the men continue on their mission. He even inadvertently becomes involved in the abduction itself, when Mayes lashes out at the crowd of men "and the barber struck him also."

Hawkshaw eventually realizes the futility of his actions and gives up his role as Mayes's defender. His final action in the story is to escape, jumping from the moving vehicle and leaving the angry mob behind. The image of Hawkshaw as he "climbed back onto the road and limped on toward town" is one of a man who has tried, and failed, to impose reason. By presenting Hawkshaw's efforts to curb the violence through appeals to thoughtful discourse futile, Faulkner ultimately argues that prejudiced vigilantism is inherently irrational.

The town of Jefferson is clearly ruled by a group of white men who feel empowered to take justice into their own hands. Their version of justice, however, is rooted in longstanding racism and the desire to maintain the traditional social structure of the pre-Civil War South. There is little room for differences of opinion, reason, or heroism in this highly-structured society, and men like Henry Hawkshaw are doomed to fail in their quest for true justice. Vigilantism in Faulker's story, then, is not a means for justice at all, but rather the preservation of a specific (and deeply prejudiced) societal order.

RUMOR, REPUTATION, AND HYPOCRISY

Rumor and reputation are powerful elements of life in "Dry September," as characters are defined by their social status and the stories that others tell about them. As an unmarried middle-aged woman and a black man, respectively, Minnie Cooper and Will Mayes have little control over their public images in the 1920s American South. Accordingly, both are passive bystanders to the action of the story and have little to say for themselves. The white McLendon, meanwhile, is seemingly automatically afforded a sense of respect and dignity that belies his cruel, abusive nature. This distinction highlights the hypocritical nature of the Jefferson community and condemns respectability based on shallow societal judgments.

At the center of the story's controversy is Minnie Cooper's honor, though Faulkner makes clear that she, herself, has little say in the matter; Minnie has no lines in "Dry September," and her reputation is entirely defined by those around her even *before* the rumors of her alleged insult or assault by Mayes. In her youth, Minnie "had been a little brighter and louder flame than any other," which may have made her the object of rumor and jealousy and excluded her from the traditional path of marriage and motherhood. Now, she is described as "good people enough," but, as an unmarried woman of nearly forty, she is no longer considered a suitable prospect for any respectable man. In either case, outward markers have been used to define Minnie's social value.

Minnie's sexual history also separates her from many other women in town. At some point in the past, "the town began to see her driving on Sunday afternoons with the cashier in the bank," a man who eventually left her for a job in Memphis. Even the mob of men in the barber shop take a moment to question her truthfulness based on her past, noting, "This ain't the first man scare she ever had," and commenting vaguely that "them ladies that get old without getting married don't have notions that a man can't…" Through these details, Faulkner establishes a world that places a premium on social reputation, even as it suggests the arbitrary, malleable nature of such judgments.

This backdrop points to the shallowness of the Jefferson community, which is all too eager to latch onto and extrapolate from potentially baseless rumors in order to cast judgment. For instance, although the men in the barber shop do not know the details of what happened to Minnie, they assume the worst, asking themselves if they will "let a black son rape a white woman on the streets of Jefferson." A white woman's reputation is fragile enough to be damaged by such a rumor, however false or truthful, and the simple possibility of sexual contact with a black man is a significant enough to warrant violence against him. Rumor and reputation, then, are more than social conveniences; they have distinct repercussions and consequences, especially for those afforded little personal agency beyond what others say about them—that is, women and black people.

Somewhat ironically, it is because of this that the veracity of Minnie's accusation remains in question throughout the story. The recent rumor of her insult or assault has brought her a lot of attention from both men and women in town, essentially allowing her to reclaim visibility from those who had dismissed her. While she had long ceased to be an object of interest to men, after the Mayes rumors, "even the young men lounging in the doorway tipped their hats and followed with their eyes the motion of her hips and legs when she passed." Her female friends, meanwhile, cannot suppress their desire to live vicariously through the details, looking at her with "secret and passionate" eyes, telling her "you must tell us what happened. What he said and did; everything." Like the picture show, which offers a glimpse into life "in its terrible and beautiful mutations," Minnie's story provides the townspeople with a salacious escape from their daily lives.

Minnie's strange actions on the evening of the attack on Will

Mayes only add to the mystery. Her laughing fit in the movie theater could be a delayed reaction to her purported assault; on the other hand, it could be another bid for attention. Faulkner leaves it up to the reader to decide on Minnie's intentions and evaluate her actions. If she is lying or even mistaken in her accusation, then identifying Mayes as her attacker was likely an attempt to boost her own reputation at his expense.

It is the white McLendon, however, who perhaps offers the greatest example of the dangers of privileging reputation above all else. Despite being the epitome of respectability because he "had commanded troops at the front in France and had been decorated for valor," McLendon is the instigator of the vigilante mob, entering the barber shop for the sole purpose of recruiting men. He establishes himself as a man of action, claiming "no talking necessary at all. I've done my talking. Who's with me?" While the other customers are seated at the shop, McLendon remains standing the whole time, demonstrating his readiness to act. He also repeatedly calls into question the reputation of those unwilling to join him. When Hawkshaw joins the men in the car, for instance, McLendon taunts him, "when this town hears how you talked tonight."

McLendon is clearly a man who knows the power of what other people say, and ostensibly well aware that the respect afforded him as a white war hero will insulate him from any repercussions for violence against Mayes. The unfairness of this—especially viewed in light of to the lack of respect afforded Minnie, and, especially, Mayes—is made all the more jarring in the final moments of the story. McLendon returns to his house, described as "trim and fresh as a birdcage and almost as small, with its clean, green-and-white paint." Like McLendon himself, the house denotes respectability, but is a deceiving façade; inside, McLendon is both emotionally and physically abusive with his wife. He berates her for waiting up for him and then attacks her. First grabbing her shoulder, he "released her and half struck, half flung her across the chair" before leaving the room. The contrast between the public and private is clear here, as McLendon has gone from defending a woman's honor out in town, to cruelly abusing a woman in his own home.

The fact that such a man has led the crusade against Mayes again points to the utter hypocrisy of the Jefferson community's conception of honor, as a—very likely innocent—man has been deemed a criminal and led to his implied death at the hands of a respected but deeply cruel "hero." "Dry September," then, offers a scathing condemnation of those who would privilege reputation above actual character, as well as those who fail to look beyond flimsy rumors and social appearances to discern the truth.

RACISM

Racial hatred is the major motivating factor for the violence depicted in "Dry September." Through Will Mayes's unjust abduction and likely murder at the hands of a vicious white mob, Faulkner presents a highly critical view of racial relations in the South in the 1920s—where black men's behavior is criminalized while white men are free to commit violent acts without fear of reprisal. At its core, "Dry September" is thus a story of the consequences of irrational fear of and anger towards black men; Faulkner's depiction of Mayes as submissive and likely innocent illustrates the degree to which racial hatred can turn deadly despite its utter irrationality.

The white men in the story clearly do not see Mayes as their equal, nor even as a full human being. With the exception of Hawkshaw, who defends Mayes's character, the men do not call their suspect by name. He is instead a "black son" or a "nigger," an epithet that denotes their feelings of hatred and racial superiority. Even Hawkshaw, who stands out as the most rational character in the story, is not immune to the profound, systemic racism of this society. His defense of Mayes is rooted in his belief that the man is a "good nigger," reinforcing the idea that black men are inherently different from—and more criminal than—white men, and that the former should be defined first and foremost by their skin color. This thinking effectively denies Mayes his humanity, and instead allows the vigilante mob to cast Mayes as a predator solely because he is a black man. His story is never heard, and it is never clear whether or not Mayes is guilty of anything at all—on the contrary, it is heavily implied that he is, in fact, innocent.

The scene in which the men abduct Mayes further creates a sharp contrast to this widespread image of black men as violent and aggressive. Mayes attempts to remain as submissive as possible during his abduction, politely asking what is happening and calling his captors "Captains," "Mr. John," and "Mr. Henry." He struggles briefly before getting into the car, even "drawing his limbs in so as not to touch" the white men surrounding him. Mayes uses the few lines he has in the story to defend himself despite seeming unaware of what crime he has committed. He argues, "I ain't done nothing. White folks, captains, I ain't done nothing: I swear 'fore God." Yet his words are meaningless to the mob of men—at this point, Mayes is seen to be guilty regardless of whether or not the rumor is true.

In contrast, the mob of men cannot contain their anger and violence, rushing towards Mayes and attacking him both verbally and physically despite his submissive demeanor. Some of the men wanted to kill Mayes at the **ice** factory where they abducted him, murmuring "Kill him! Kill the black son!" As they put Mayes into the car, the men also strike "with random blows," further suggesting they aim not to subdue their prisoner, but rather to satisfy their own desire to inflict violence. The men also use **handcuffs** on Mayes when they transport him to the

location of his death, a detail that directly references the treatment of black slaves only some decades earlier. The handcuffs do not come from a member of law enforcement or any official authority in town, but rather by a group of angry white men subduing a black man. Faulkner refers to Mayes's "manacled hands," recalling images of black slaves in shackles as they were brought work or to be murdered by their white slave owners. The use of this image reminds readers that despite ostensibly being out of bondage, black men will never be free within a deeply racist society.

GENDER AND CLASS

The characters in "Dry September" act within strictly proscribed gender and class boundaries, which Faulkner refers to vaguely as "snobbery male and retaliation female." These categories dictate the actions of both men and women in Jefferson, robbing individuals of broader opportunity and in, some senses, free will. Such rigid boundaries, the story suggests, ignore the possibility of female agency and force men to perform an authoritative masculinity that, in this story, quickly escalates into violence.

Minnie Cooper's status in society is marred by a number of factors, starting with the fact that she is not part of the upper class. Her social routine is similar to that of richer women: she dresses in the afternoon, meets up with friends, and spends time socializing in the shops. Yet Minnie only has "three or four new voile dresses" to choose from each day, and she and her friends "haggle over the prices" without actually making any purchases. This class distinction is of the utmost importance in Jefferson, and is the reason that Minnie finds herself unmarried and alone in her late thirties. Her beauty allowed her to enter into the upper echelon of society for a time, but only while her friends were "still children enough to be unclass-conscious." She was unable to compete with her upper-class friends for the available men to marry and has since found herself living with her ageing mother and aunt.

While the men in the barber shop consider it necessary to defend the honor of a white woman, they still pause to consider Minnie's specific social status. When one man asks who Minnie is, Hawkshaw notes, "She's about forty, I reckon. She ain't married." As a woman, Minnie is defined by her age and marital status—evidence further in support of Mayes's innocence, because the implication is that even a black man would not rape an older, unmarried woman. Another man jokes that the weather can make men do strange things, "Even to her." Thus even as the men prepare to violently avenge this wrongdoing, they question Minnie's social value amongst themselves.

As a relative outsider in her own society, Minnie is a passive observer with little to offer beyond this minor scandal. Like her visits to the moving pictures, Minnie's trips downtown give her a glimpse into a lifestyle she will never know. She watches the younger women, "their delicate, silken heads and thin, awkward arms and conscious hips, clinging to one another or shrieking and giggling with paired boys in the soda fountain when she passed." This is a sort of reenactment of the same courting rituals she herself nearly got to participate in as a young woman, yet which are closed to her now. Even in her relationship with the bank teller, Minnie is powerless and devoid of agency. She is a passenger, both literally and figuratively, driven around without the opportunity to make her own decisions. The boyfriend leaves her to take a better job in Memphis, opting for the path of upward mobility that is not available to Minnie. This sense of exclusion is reinforced every Christmas, as the man returns for an "annual bachelors' party at a hunting club on the river," an event that excludes Minnie on the basis of both her gender and class.

In contrast with Minnie's "idle, empty days" and complete passivity, the men of the barber shop feel compelled to act without consulting Minnie or any other woman. In fact, once Minnie has made her way to the moving pictures that evening, the news of Mayes's abduction is common knowledge, yet no one speaks directly to her about it. This strongly suggests that the abduction of Mayes has little to do with Minnie's safety, and much more to do with fulfilling the obligations of pre-established gender roles.

Indeed, the men of Jefferson feel obligated to perpetuate a damaging, performative masculinity that is reinforced through violence, both implicit and explicit. The scene in the barber shop is almost theatrical, in that many of the characters use symbols, gestures, and physical space to establish dominance. The scene opens with the barber standing as his customers sit and talk; as the conversation about Minnie and Mayes gets more heated, however, customers sit upright or jump out of their seats. One man must even be forced back into his chair: "he arrested himself reclining, his head lifted, the barber still pressing him down." Hawkshaw holds "the razor poised above the half-risen client," keeping the man in check; another barber "held the drummer's face down, the razor poised." The act of standing over another is a physical gesture of dominance and is repeated throughout the story. In the final scene, for example, McLendon notably stands over his wife, "poised on the balls of his feet," until she looks down submissively.

The clearest, and most dangerous symbol, of toxic masculinity in the story McLendon's **gun**. As he leaves the barber shop with the angry mob of men, "the butt of a heavy automatic pistol" peeks out from his pants pocket. As the weapon that will be used to abduct and presumably kill Mayes, the pistol is a badge of pride for McLendon. Known for his military service, McLendon has already established his masculinity and social status through previous acts of state-sanctioned violence. The pistol makes a final appearance at the end of the story, as McLendon strips down before bed, leaving his weapon on the bedside table. Even in the privacy and safety of his own home, McLendon keeps this symbol of masculinity close by and ready

for use.

When viewed through the lens of the restrictive gender and class boundaries, the characters in "Dry September" have very little freedom to establish individual opinions. Women like Minnie Cooper, who do not belong to the upper class in Jefferson, are forced to wait for a suitable partner to choose them and run the risk of a lifetime of spinsterhood. While men move more freely in this society, they are obligated to reiterate their masculinity, mainly through threats or acts of violence. In either case, attempts to move within narrowly-defined social constructs shape characters' behavior and specifically push them to cast aside a man with the least agency of all—that is, Will Mayes, a black man—in a performative attempt to prove their own social value.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HEAT

Faulkner uses metaphors of heat and combustion to convey the irrationality of the mob mentality among the white men in "Dry September." The town has experienced sixty-two days of drought, and the weather becomes an excuse for inappropriate behavior: "It's this durn weather [...] It's enough to make a man do anything," one man at the barbershop says in reference to why someone would sexually assault the unmarried, thirty-something Minnie Cooper. It's clear that the weather is having a similar effect on the men in the barber shop themselves; the "stale" air in the shop seems to heat up throughout the scene, as one man's shirt is "sweat-stained" and another draws "his sleeve across his sweating face." As the mob runs out of the barber shop and into a sort of battle, the air has "a metallic taste at the base of the tongue," foreshadowing the death of Will Mayes.

In the final section of the story, McLendon is unable to control his body's response to the heat, which reiterates the connection between the weather and irrational behavior. After returning home from assaulting and likely murdering Mayes, McLendon mops the sweat from his head and shoulders with his shirt, only to find that he is sweating again. He "wiped his body again, and, with his body pressed against the dusty screen, he stood panting." This full-body response to the events of the evening strongly suggests that the men's actions have not brought justice to Jefferson and have only worsened the racial divide in the town, further establishing heat as a symbol of irrational violence.

ICE

To counterbalance the images of **heat** and combustion in the story, ice symbolizes relief from social oppression. However, like ice, this relief is often brief and fleeting; just as ice is a transient physical state that melts in the heat, Minnie and Will Mayes can only find momentary relief from the burning anger and judgement of the white men around them. For instance, as Minnie Cooper breaks down in a fit of uncontrollable laughter in the picture house, her friends fan her and gather "ice for her temples," remedies that immediately calm her: "While the ice was fresh and cold she stopped laughing and lay still for a time," briefly bringing her out of the stagnant atmosphere of Jefferson. Once the ice pack melts, however, Minnie continues to break down. Meanwhile, the mob of men notably comes to find Mayes at his workplace in an ice factory, a symbol of refuge from the racial heat of the town. Inside the ice factory, Mayes is just another employee, free to work hard to earn his pay. This cool and safe interior space is then juxtaposed with the "abandoned brick kiln," a space of intense heat and dryness, where Jefferson's racial hatred boils over and brings Mayes to his violent end.

GUN

John McLendon's gun symbolizes the extreme violence behind the racism in Jefferson, and the imbalance of power among black and white men. McLendon's gun is seen peeking out of his waistband as he leaves the barber shop with the mob of angry men, foreshadowing that evening's violence. He makes no real effort to hide his weapon in public: as a white man, McLendon does not fear the local authorities and feels confident in his right to employ violence without consequence. The gun also serves as a warning to any who would challenge his authority. His experience in the military is also a reminder that for white men during this time period, violence is a viable form of upward social mobility. McLendon uses the gun to extract Will Mayes from his job at the **ice** factory, interrupting his work shift and introducing the threat of violence. The gun makes a final appearance at the end of the story, as McLendon takes it out and lays it on his bedside table at home, after the murder of Will Mayes. In this intimate, private scene as McLendon disrobes and prepares for bed, the gun stands out as a harsh reminder of the omnipresence of violence in this society.

HANDCUFFS

The handcuffs used in Will Mayes's abduction symbolize the ongoing social and emotional enslavement of black men in this society, and the ways in which they are criminalized without reason or proof. As the angry mob of white men attempts to get Mayes into the car, an

unidentified character produces the handcuffs. The mysterious origin of the handcuffs further suggests the possibility that one of the white men is a member of law enforcement, making the local authorities complicit in the extrajudicial killing of a black man. What is more, the image of a black man being shackled by a group of white men evokes images of slavery, reminding readers of its enduring legacy and of the slave-era mentality that lasted long after emancipation.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* published in 2015.

Part 1 Quotes

"Except it wasn't Will Mayes," a barber said. He was a thin, sand-colored man with a mild face, who was shaving a client. "I know Will Mayes. He's a

good nigger. And I know Miss Minnie Cooper, too."

Related Characters: Henry Hawkshaw (speaker), Will Mayes, Minnie Cooper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the story, as men in the barber shop discuss the room that Will Mayes assaulted or insulted Minnie Cooper, the barber (Henry Hawkshaw) immediately asserts that Will Mayes is innocent. This is based on his character assessments of both Mayes and Cooper; he argues that Mayes is incapable of this kind of thing and implies that Minnie Cooper, as an unmarried middle-aged white woman, is not likely to be the victim of unwanted sexual contact.

Hawkshaw's assertion introduces the theme of reputation. The men in the barber shop have no actual information about the rumor and do not bother to investigate the facts; likewise, the people of Jefferson rely on unsubstantiated rumor and snap judgements to determine people's status and value in society. These judgements can be damaging to a character like Minnie Cooper, who is increasingly marginalized in Jefferson; however, for a black man like Will Mayes, they can be a matter of life or death.

What's more, the fact that even Hawkshaw—a character who staunchly defends Mayes—refers to him using a racist epithet underscores the extent to which racial prejudice is embedded into the fabric of this society, in which black men are invariably defined first and foremost by their skin color.

"It's this durn weather," another said. "It's enough to make a man do anything."

Related Characters: Will Mayes, Minnie Cooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Faulkner begins his story by noting that it hasn't rained for more than two months in Jefferson, and as the conversation in the barbershop gets increasingly tense, an unnamed speaker suggests that the current stifling weather can make people do crazy things. This commentary on the weather and its effects on the people of Jefferson offers surprising insight into the actions of nearly all of the characters in the story. Even the title of the story, "Dry September," emphasizes the dramatic importance of the environmental conditions. Historically, this story takes place during a time of prolonged droughts in the American South that only intensified the economic effects of the Great Depression. That the town of Jefferson has gone without rain for sixty-two days suggests a backdrop of frustration and feelings of powerlessness that exacerbate pre-existing societal tensions.

The speaker is specifically referring to the Mayes-Cooper rumor, noting in jest that the weather could drive a man to sexually assault any woman, including an unmarried one of nearly forty, like Minnie Cooper; the irony of the comment, however, is that the weather will also drive these men to commit murder despite having no evidence of Mayes's guilt. The effect of the weather on the characters' physical and mental states is reiterated throughout the story.

"Well," he said, "are you going to sit there and let a black son rape a white woman on the streets of Jefferson?"

Related Characters: John McLendon (speaker), Will Mayes, Minnie Cooper

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

This is John McLendon's comment as he bursts into the barber shop, and it marks a pivotal moment in the first part of the story. Before McLendon's arrival, the men are discussing the Cooper-Mayes rumor as casual and disinterested observers; McLendon's arrival and subsequent comments are a sharp call to action, and in a short period, nearly all of the men in the barber shop leave with him to retaliate against Mayes.

McLendon establishes himself as a man of action, and the few words he uses are significant. While no one knows specifically what may have happened between Will and Minnie, McLendon boldly proclaims it was rape, a crime that was certainly punishable by death in this society. In addition, his assertion that a rape occurred reflects the deeply-racist notion that black men are inherently sexually violent. What's more, while he is not the only white man to use a racial epithet in the barber shop, McLendon has stripped the issue down to black-on-white violence by referring to Mayes as a generic "black son." This suggests McLendon doesn't care whether or not it was actually Mayes in the first place, and instead is looking for an excuse to rally the other men of the barber shop around their shared racial anger.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ Then the town began to say: "Poor Minnie." "But she is old enough to take care of herself," others said.

Related Characters: Minnie Cooper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

This is short discussion between two unidentified speakers in Jefferson regarding Minnie Cooper's personal life and, in particular, her relationship with a widowed cashier from the local bank. Part II of the story is a profile of Minnie Cooper, specifically relating how she is defined by the townspeople of Jefferson. Many of the life events described in this section are determined by her social status and the whims of her friends and acquaintances.

According to the omniscient narrator, Minnie was attractive as a young woman, but did not manage to find a husband like her friends did. She dated a widower, enjoying rides around town in his car, "the first automobile in town." This small amount of female freedom had a complicated effect on Minnie's reputation, however: as this quote illustrates, Minnie's personal choices became part of the public conversation. Whether motivated by a belief that they knew what was best for Minnie, a desire to gossip, or even malicious joy at another's misfortune, nearly all of the townspeople in this story repeat and dissect rumors about her. At no point in this section does Minnie speak for herself or demonstrate free will or agency over her actions and their consequences.

Part 3 Quotes

❝ "Kill him, kill the black son!" the voice murmured. They dragged the Negro to the car. The barber had waited beside the car. He could feel himself sweating and he knew he was going to be sick at the stomach. "What is it, captains?" the Negro said. "I ain't done nothing. 'Fore God, Mr John." Someone produced handcuffs.

Related Characters: Will Mayes (speaker), John McLendon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Will Mayes and an unidentified speaker is happening while Mayes is being abducted from his job at the ice factory by the mob of angry men who will eventually kill him. The men are so intent on violence that they want to kill him immediately, right outside of his place of work, rather than taking the time to drive him to more private location. Clearly, they believe their violence to be justified, as the men have no fear of punishment by local authorities. In fact, the handcuffs may belong to a member of law enforcement taking part in this moment of vigilante justice.

The use of the phrase "black son" again reinforces the theme of racism in this story, reminding readers that these men are not looking to hurt Mayes specifically, but rather black men in general. Mayes's demeanor, on the other hand, is completely deferential towards the white men; as a black man in this society, he knows that any show of defiance will only make the situation worse for him. He calls the men captains and refers to McLendon as Mr. John, despite the fact that he is about to be handcuffed, beaten, and killed. In addition, Mayes proclaims his innocence in the hopes that the men will leave him alone. Nevertheless, his attempts at

placating his abductors proves futile because they don't actually care about his guilt or innocence.

"Let me out, John," he said. "Jump out, nigger-lover," McLendon said without turning his head.

Related Characters: John McLendon, Henry Hawkshaw (speaker), Will Mayes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange with McLendon marks a pivotal moment in the story for Henry Hawkshaw. The barber has spent the entire story defending Will Mayes and trying to insert some sense of rationality into this angry mob of men, following them from the barber shop to their cars and joining them as they abduct Mayes. As the men are driving out of town towards a secluded spot, however, he realizes that he has failed in his attempts to reason with the angry mob.

While he may be a rational and principled man, Hawkshaw is not a hero in this story, and he knows that there is no way he can save Mayes's life. He chooses to protect himself from witnessing or inadvertently participating in the death of a man he believes to be innocent, regardless of his race. McLendon reads this resistance as an affront to their shared racial identity, calling Hawkshaw a "nigger-lover" in an attempt to goad him to stay and participate. Hawkshaw jumps out of the moving vehicle and the story follows him, which means that neither he nor the readers are witness to the murder of Mayes. Mayes's death is subsequently alluded to twice in the story, when Hawkshaw sees the car return missing a passenger, and again in the town square, where residents share the rumor in passing.

Part 4 Quotes

"Do you feel strong enough to go out?" they said, their eyes bright too, with a dark glitter. "When you have had time to get over the shock, you must tell us what happened. What he said and did; everything."

Related Characters: Will Mayes, Minnie Cooper

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Minnie's friends come to visit her and help her prepare to go downtown for a social outing to the movies; in reality, however, they are curious about Minnie's emotional state after the rumors and hungry for gossip about the events themselves. Rumor and gossip play a significant role in the lives of the townspeople, in part because so much of their livelihoods depends on social status, and in part because there is not much else to keep them occupied. It is possible that Minnie invented the entire story in a bid for attention and social advancement, and if so, she has achieved her goal: she is the center of attention throughout Jefferson for this one day.

Yet in contrast to the anger and outrage expressed by the men in the barber shop, Minnie's friends are excited by the news, hardly masking their desire to live vicariously through this mysterious sexual encounter. Again, it is noteworthy that Minnie does not respond to her friends in this scene; first of all, Minnie's silence casts further doubt on the veracity of the rumor itself and on the identification of Will Mayes as the attacker; secondly, it reinforces her passivity and lack of agency within this society.

"That's the one: see? The one in pink in the middle." "Is that her? What did they do with the nigger? Did they?" "Sure. He's all right." "All right, is he?" "Sure. He went on a little trip."

Related Characters: Will Mayes, Minnie Cooper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180-181

Explanation and Analysis

This is a snippet of conversation between two men in the town square, possibly overheard by Minnie Cooper as she walks downtown with her friends to the movies. This is the same evening that the rumors have surfaced, and Minnie is an object of curiosity for the people of Jefferson. As a middle-aged woman, Minnie had become all but invisible to the men in town, but this rumor had caused them to notice her again. The first speaker points her out, identifying her by the color of her dress to his friend, who had no idea who she was. They take little notice of her as a person, however, and immediately move on to discuss Will Mayes. The news of his abduction and murder has clearly reached the town square by this time, and the townspeople communicate this information as efficiently as the original rumor of the sexual assault. Their flippant reference to Mayes's violent end highlights the ways in which racial violence is normalized in

this society.

The way in which the men discuss Minnie also presents the sad irony of the situation: if Minnie fabricated the story for attention, which is likely, that attention will be superficial and fleeting. Like the two men in this exchange on the square, the people of Jefferson will overlook Minnie as a person to focus on the scandal that surrounds her, and will quickly lose interest in her situation and move on to the next, possibly juicier, piece of gossip.

"Do you see?" the friends said. Their voices sounded like long, hovering sighs of hissing exultation. "There's not a Negro on the square. Not one."

Related Characters: Will Mayes, Minnie Cooper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

This comment by Minnie's friends refers to the effect of Will Mayes's murder on the black men of Jefferson. The angry mob in the barber shop was intent on killing a black man send a message to the black population of the town, and that is exactly what happens. In the end, it did not matter whether or not it was Mayes who attacked Minnie Cooper, or whether the incident happened at all; this act of vigilante violence was just another expression of racial domination, allowing the white men of Jefferson to exert power over black men. The constant threat of violence as a form of control suggests that black men still endure the legacy of slavery, even decades after emancipation.

The joy with which the women discuss the disappearance of black men from the town square, meanwhile, illuminates the hypocrisy within this social group. While in private, they were curious and eager for details about Will and Minnie, they were now happy to be rid of black men in their public spaces. They offer their implicit support of the actions of the white men of Jefferson, satisfied with the privilege of being protected from even the most vague and unsubstantiated threat.

Part 5 Quotes

"Haven't I told you about sitting up like this, waiting to see when I come in?" "John," she said. She laid the magazine down. Poised on the balls of his feet, he glared at her with his hot eyes, his sweating face. "Didn't I tell you?" He went toward her. She looked up then. He caught her shoulder. She stood passive, looking at him. "Don't, John. I couldn't sleep... The heat; something. Please, John. You're hurting me."

Related Characters: McLendon's Wife, John McLendon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

This is the closing conversation of the story and offers a glimpse into the private life of John McLendon that reinforces the overall sense of hypocrisy in the tale. McLendon has established himself in Jefferson as a decorated war hero, man of action, and defender of white women's honor, and he incites nearly all of the men in the barber shop to violence by calling on their values as southern white men. Yet his actions in private, namely the verbal and physical abuse of his wife, call into question the values and heroism he pretends to embody. He accuses his wife of hovering over him, staying awake in order to know how late he has been out. This concern is ironic: while McLendon is quick to observe and judge those around him, he fears having his actions observed or questioned by others. He resorts to violence immediately and ignores his wife's pleas to stop; this final exchange of the story helps to emphasize McLendon not as a heroic or honorable man, but as a bully who uses violence to establish dominance and social status. While domestic violence was more widely accepted (and not illegal) at this point in history, it is clear that McLendon's abuse of his wife stems from the same violent impulse that led to Mayes's death, and again presents McLendon as the villain of the story—despite the fact that he is a hero in the townspeople's eyes.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

It has not rained for sixty-two days, and a rumor has spread "through the bloody September twilight … like **fire in dry grass**." Men gathered in a barber shop in—the air stale—discuss the rumor, linking a local white woman, Minnie Cooper, with a black man named Will Mayes.

The weather creates an oppressive backdrop throughout the story. The relentless hot, dry weather has riled the residents of this small Mississippi town, and the "bloody" twilight forebodes the violence to come.

The barber, Henry Hawkshaw, does not believe that Mayes was involved, insisting that he is "a good nigger." Minnie is an unmarried woman of "about forty," furthering Hawkshaw's doubts. Other men in the shop angrily accuse Hawkshaw of being a "nigger lover," but Hawkshaw insists that likely nothing happened at all; the others are aghast that he'd privilege a black man's word over a white woman's. Another client suggests that the "**weather** [is] enough to make a man do anything"—even to an unmarried older woman like Minnie.

The rumor linking Cooper and Mayes remains vague throughout the story, and none of the characters attempt to find out details or confirm it. Instead, most of the men readily portray it as a case of a black man victimizing a white woman and threatening the long-established racial boundaries. The comment about the weather reinforces the general idea that the heat and drought play an active role in the actions of these characters.

Hawkshaw holds his ground and urges the other men to get the facts before doing anything, but the clients insist he must not stand for this as a white man and further tell him to "go back North" (despite Hawkshaw having been born in this town). John McLendon, a decorated war hero, then enters the barber shop, immediately asking the patrons, "are you going to let a black son rape a white woman on the streets of Jefferson?"

Hawkshaw establishes himself as a rational and principled man, focusing on Mayes's character and reputation. The other men, however, view this defense of a black man as a betrayal of their identity as southern white men, as illustrated by their suggestion that Hawkshaw move north. The arrival of McLendon intensifies the discussion, especially as he is the first to use the word rape to describe the rumored encounter.

McLendon invites the men to join him in an as-yet unspecified plan of action, even as one client wonders aloud whether anything happened at all—after all, Minnie has had a "man scare" before. McLendon promptly dismisses this, insisting it doesn't make a difference—they can't let black men "get away with it until one really does it."

McLendon doesn't care whether or not the rumor is true and is willing to use this event as an opportunity to send a message to the black men of Jefferson—underscoring that the men's actions are based on prejudice rather than a genuine desire for justice.

Hawkshaw continues to defend Mayes's innocence and suggests that they gather evidence and go to the authorities, but nearly all of the men choose to leave with McLendon. As they go, **McLendon's gun** peeks out from his waistband. Hawkshaw suddenly decides to join the men and rushes after them, commenting that "I can't let…" The **air outside**, meanwhile, is "flat and dead." Back in the shop, the two remaining barbers wonder aloud if "he really done it to her."

The combination of the oppressive heat and McLendon's enthusiasm has whipped the men into a frenzy of irrational anger. The gun peeping out of McLendon's waistband foreshadows the violence to come. Hawkshaw, having failed to maintain calm among the men in the barber shop, joins them in the hopes that he can keep them from hurting or killing Mayes.

PART 2

Minnie Cooper is 38 or 39 years old and single, living in a small house with her aging mother and aunt. Her days are routine and uniform: she wakes at 10:00 a.m., spends the morning swinging on her porch, naps, and then dresses up and goes downtown with her friends. Both she and her clothing are "faintly haggard," and she is "still on the slender side of ordinary looking."

Minnie is one of the main characters in this story, yet she never speaks for herself. She is portrayed as passive and helpless, and the fact that she is a middle-aged single woman places her in an unfavorable situation. Here, Faulkner focuses on her outward appearance to highlight the fact that, to this society, that is all that matters.

As a pretty young woman, Minnie was invited to social events for a while, until her social group became more aware of class differences and their importance in society. Minnie soon began to lose ground and while her friends married, she did not find anyone to settle down with. Children began to call her "aunty," and her friends recalled how popular she had been in her youth.

Minnie's beauty and popularity as a youth did not translate to marriage, which is the main objective for a woman in this society. This moment subtly draws attention to the strict class differences that, like racism and gender roles, shape life in this narrow-minded town. Becoming an "aunty" it cements Minnie's spinster status and lack of agency in this world.

Minnie began to ride around town with an older widower who worked as a cashier at the bank. He had the first automobile in Jefferson, "a red runabout," and Minnie wore the first motoring bonnet and veil. The details of their relationship are not clear, but when the bank cashier left for a new job in Memphis, Minnie was not invited to accompany him. He has returned to Jefferson every Christmas for a party at the hunting club, but she is never invited.

Minnie's relationship with the bank teller is unconventional due to their age difference and the fact that he was previously married; as such, it causes gossip around town. While Minnie was able to enjoy the status and attention that came with rides in his automobile, the fact that he does not even call on her when he returns again emphasizes that she has little power, agency, or appeal as an older woman in a deeply sexist society.

Many years have passed since that romance, and people in town have begun to notice that Minnie started drinking whiskey during the daytime. She gets the alcohol from the soda fountain clerk, a boy who takes pity on her and decides that "she's entitled to a little fun."

Part II returns to Minnie in the present day, driven to drink by the disappointments of her social life, and pitied by those around her. This scene underscores the town's penchant for gossip—which turns deadly when it comes to Will Mayes.

PART 3

As the day "die[s] in a **pall of dust**," Henry Hawkshaw catches up to John McLendon and the other men, who are driving out to the **ice** factory to find Will Mayes at work. Hawkshaw attempts to explain that since Mayes has not yet fled, that means he is innocent; the other men ignore him and discuss in vague terms what they plan to do with Mayes.

Hawkshaw's attempts to reason with McLendon and the other men continue to be futile, suggesting that they are beyond rationality; they do not care about Mayes's actual guilt or innocence. The sunset brings no relief from the heat and dry air, reflecting the fact that the men are as enthusiastic about their plan for violence as they were in the earlier in the day.

Mayes, who works as the night watchman, comes out of the **ice** factory at McLendon's insistence. Under the "wan hemorrhage of the moon," the men rush at him, then **handcuff** and beat him. Hawkshaw stands and watches, feeling sick to his stomach. While some of the men want to kill Mayes right there, in the parking lot next to the factory, McLendon has them put the man in the car. In the meantime, Mayes proclaims his innocence and begs for an explanation. The men give him none, and they all drive off—Mayes inside of the car with four white men, with another man riding on the side board.

Mayes notably works at an ice factory—a place that, in theory, provides relief from the intense heat of the town (heat that, in turn, symbolizes its drive toward racist violence). Of course, ice melts in the heat, reflecting that Mayes's position as an upstanding citizen proves no match for the racist ire of these men. The image of this black man in handcuffs, unaware of his crime, is a symbol of the ongoing criminalization of black men in the post-slavery era. The pale red shade of the moon and the reference to hemorrhaging, or shedding of blood, foreshadow the spilling of blood that will happen later that night.

In the car, Mayes is sandwiched in the back seat next to Hawkshaw, pulling his arms and legs in to keep from touching anyone. As they speed out of town and towards an old abandoned **kiln**, Mayes continues to ask for an explanation and for help, while Hawkshaw begins to feel sick and asks to stop the car. McLendon refuses to do so, telling Hawkshaw that he will need to jump and calling him, once again, a "nigger-lover."

Hawkshaw, who accompanied the mob of men in hopes of keeping control of the situation, now realizes that he has no control over anything; the men's prejudice cannot be reasoned with because it's inherently irrational. Mayes's continued pleas for an explanation strongly suggest he has no idea what's happening—and, it follows, is innocent of any crime.

Hawkshaw jumps out of the moving car, rolling into the ditch along the side of the road, choking and retching in the **dry grass**. He gets up and limps along the road back towards town. As he is walking, he sees McLendon's car pass again in the other direction, holding only four men and no one on the side board. The moon has finally risen into the night sky, but the dust clings to everything, including Hawkshaw.

Unable to put a stop to the violence, Hawkshaw's only option at this point is to save himself by jumping from the car. While he does not witness the violence itself, he is able to note that Mayes is not in the car on the return trip to town, strongly implying that he was murdered.

PART 4

On the same night as Will Mayes's abduction, Minnie Cooper dresses to go out. She is trembling, feverish and nervous, and her friends come to help her prepare. As they watch her put on her new dress to go out, they want to know more about what happened with Mayes. They ask about "what he said and did; everything." Minnie says nothing and they all go out to the square, under the oppressive **heat** of the evening.

Minnie's nervousness in this scene could be due to a number of different factors: if the rumors are true, she may be dealing with the after-effects of sexual violence. On the other hand, if she made up the rumors, she may just be nervously excited about the attention she is about the receive. Her friends, however, are more interested in the gossip than her state of mind.

As the women walk down the street, Minnie is at the center of the group, and has to breathe deeply to control her trembling. They walk slowly, which gives the people in town a chance to notice her and to discuss the rumor, as well as the new rumor that Mayes "went on a little trip." At the same time, Minnie's friends note that there are no black men on the square.

The news of the murder of Mayes has already spread into town, and this brings Minnie even more attention. The lack of black men in the town square suggests that John McLendon's plan to scare the black men of Jefferson worked—and again reflects that this act of vigilante "justice" has always really been an act of pure racism.

Minnie and her friends enter the movie theater and take their seats. The theater is "like a miniature fairyland with its lighted lobby and colored lithographs," and this gives Minnie hope that she will be able to calm down and control herself. She attempts to suppress a fit of laughter but is unable to; she is so loud that her friends have to escort her out of the theater.

Like her nerves earlier in the night, it is unclear whether Minnie's laughter is in response to trauma or simply another grab for attention. Her friends accompany her out of the theater under the pretense of helping her, but again, are more interested in partaking in the gossip.

Minnie's friends bring her home in a taxi, fan her, rub **ice** on her to calm her down, and call the doctor. The ice works briefly but does not stay fresh and cold for long in this **heat**, and as soon as the ice begins to melt, Minnie's fit of laughter returns.

Part IV closes by reminding readers of the oppressive heat that may have influenced Minnie's actions as well. Ice is again presented as a symbol of escape from the manic violence whipped up by the heat and prejudice; yet again, it proves only fleetingly helpful.

PART 5

John McLendon returns to his neat, new home at around midnight, and upon entering, notices that his wife is still awake. He confronts her, scolding her for staying up and waiting for him. She denies waiting up for him, noting that the **heat** kept her awake, but McLendon doesn't believe her and grabs her shoulder, hurting her. He then strikes her, leaving her crumpled across the chair as he exits the room.

John McLendon's relationship with his wife offers further insight into his character: despite his public presence as a war hero and upstanding member of the Jefferson community, he is revealed as a violent bully and domestic abuser.

Walking into the screened porch he uses as a bedroom, McLendon mops the sweat off of himself, undresses and takes his **gun** from his waistband and leaves it on the bedside table. By the time he is undressed, he is sweating all over again and must use his clothes to re-dry himself. He stands at the dusty screen, panting in the **heat**. The night is silent, "stricken beneath the cold moon and lidless stars."

The gun on McLendon's bedside table is a symbol of the omnipresence of violence in his life as a form of dominance over other people, especially more vulnerable groups like women and black men. Heat again is ever-present throughout the scene, reflecting McLendon's prejudice. The story ends with a symbolic parallel: just as the heat has not broken that night, the murder of Mayes will do nothing to alleviate the racial tensions in Jefferson.

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