

Cross Over

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I have followed the College Standards of academic honesty in writing this essay. I have retained a copy of this paper for my files.

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William Faulkner's short story, "Shall Not Perish," reveals how the people left behind deal with their loved ones dying in war, throughout the generations from the Civil War to World War II. The strength and stoicism of a poor, working class, farming family, The Griers, juxtaposes with the attitude of rich, upperclass banker Major De Spain. Both families have in common the death of a son in World War II, but they illustrate a vast difference in their ability to accept the value of the sacrifice of their sons for the greater good. Both the poor and rich man's sons fight as members of one unified nation against the evils existing in the world. This sense of national pride, and common goal, ties the sacrifice of sons in war for the common good to a much older story of the acceptance of sacrifice for the greater good: that of God's sacrifice of his only son Jesus for all the people of the world so they, "should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). While many of Faulkner's works highlight the differences between classes and the inequities that exist, in this short story, a crossing of class boundaries allows for a vision of unity between rich and poor.

The contrasting ways in which the Griers and Major De Spain deal with their grief is influenced by their social status and class level. The Griers do not have time for much grief, though they love Pete. This family depends on working the land to survive, and so their time is limited. The boy says, "And we allowed ourselves one day to grieve, and that was all. Because it was April, the hardest middle push of planting time, and there was the land ..." (102). Life goes on, and the work must still be done, even when their son is dead. To illustrate the Grier's poor, working class status, they must ride the bus to Jefferson because they don't have a car. Because

they want to appear respectable when they arrive at Major De Spain's house, they go on the bus ride in their bare feet. These bare feet get dusty, but the boy says, "we washed our feet," (106) and their previously shined shoes are nicely preserved in one of their most prized possessions, the zippered satchel. They take great care of the satchel, and they treasure it. The father marvels at the zipper and tries it out, but then "Mother made him stop before he wore it out" (105). This care in their appearance and few possessions reveals that they are simple, but proud people, who care for the things they have. They are proud of themselves because they are moral people who work hard, even if they are poor and must ride the bus into town.

The Griers travel by bus to Jefferson to visit the only other member of the community to have lost a son in the war to show him he is not alone, and that they understand how he feels. However, when they enter the rich man's house and into his world, they find a very different reaction to grief, as well as, to the value Major De Spain places on his son's military service. In his essay, "A Matter of Choice: The Locked Door Theme in Faulkner," John Rosenman discusses Faulkner's children and their way of, "eliciting respect for the moral strength and integrity of his poor whites. For instance, in "Shall Not Perish" and "Barn Burning," the Grier boy and "Sarty" Snopes both prevail over the locked door of De Spain's mansion" (10). The Grier boy gives us his perspective of the De Spain mansion from outside, and the grand interior once they have crossed the threshold of the locked door to show the vast differences in class and social status. The Griers have previously shown their moral strength and integrity by forging ahead with work that must be done, and by taking the bus to Jefferson to show support for Major De Spain and his loss. Now, Mother Grier especially, shows her moral integrity in the way she

interacts with Major De Spain in his time of grief and need. Her young son also sees his mother's strength and takes pride in his family, understanding the value of his brothers sacrifice.

This perspective of the poor farm boy in the rich banker's house reveals the dramatic contrast between economic and social status in the community that affects how these families deal differently with grief, death, and sacrifice. Father Grier says to his young son when they are shining their shoes, "De Spain is rich ..." (104). The father seem to think this statement says all the boy needs to know of De Spain. The Grier boy doesn't realize how different De Spain is from himself until they go to Jefferson and he sees, "the yard which was bigger than farms I had seen ... on to the house that to me anyway looked bigger than the courthouse ... (106). The boy describes all the interior furnishings from his limited perspective of the world - basically his own farm, in a contrast and comparison format. He describes this new, dazzling world in relation to the things he knows. He thinks about the, "light hanging in the middle of the ceiling the size of our whole washtub ...," and the "gold-colored harp that would have blocked our barn door" (107). These descriptions of scale, and comparison of a frivolous huge harp to the utilitarian structure of the barn door show the vast differences in wealth between these families. In addition, it brings to light the Grier boy's identification with, and understanding of, the importance of the life his family leads, and the things that they treasure as valuable in their life.

The younger, unnamed Grier son is left behind. He becomes the Grier's hope for the future, now that their older son Pete is dead. The Griers still have a son to carry on their family legacy, but Major De Spain has lost his only son, and he is older man, so he may not have more children. Major De Spain may feel that his legacy has been destroyed, and this could explain

why he seems so desperate. The implication is that he wants to kill himself because of his grief at his son's death, with the gun that lays on "a table shaped like a coffin," but Mrs. Grier stops him (107). She helps Major De Spain realize the tremendous value of his son's sacrifice, and his enduring legacy in the form of the spreading of American democracy and freedom. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln declares, "that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth". "Shall Not Perish" echoes these thoughts throughout, and the Grier family exemplifies the mandate that their son will not have died in vain. They must not allow their grief to overshadow the power of their son's sacrifice.

Major De Spain, "a banker powerful in money and politics both ... -an old man," contrasts dramatically with the Grier boy and his family in nearly every way possible, but they have one thing in common that allows them to cross over into each other's worlds - they all know what it feels like to have a loved one die in war (107). This connects them to an even larger community, to all those people who have given their sons to die in war. Charles Aiken describes how the county is connected to the rest of the world, and how this is best shown in Faulkner's work through the eyes of a child, "Symbolically, Yoknapatawpha is a place with a core, but the county has no isolating walls. The interconnection of Yoknapatawpha County is, perhaps, best expressed by Faulkner through the perception of a child. The little Grier boy in "Shall Not Perish" comprehends his niche on earth ... (348)." This core, with a connection to the larger world leads to Faulkner's consideration of the tremendous value of military service. The worth

placed on Pete's service, and especially his death, is revealed mostly by Mother Grier, but through the eyes and narration of her child, when she speaks to Major De Spain.

De Spain does not accept his son's, and his own sacrifices, as a valuable part of human history as the Griers do. When he begins to speak, it becomes clear that he is bitter, disappointed, and angry at his son's death. He says to Mrs. Grier, "You too were advised that your son poured out his blood on the altar of unpreparedness and inefficiency" (107). He is obviously making a political statement that has a lot to do with his upperclass status, and knowledge of the workings of government and war. He is unable to realize that he must accept that his son chose to fight and die for a cause he believed in. The Griers are able to understand the huge value of the soldier's courage and sacrifice, and show grief, but they want to make sure their son's life was not given for no reason, so they honor his death. De Spain is jaded and angry when Mrs. Grier merely tells him to "Weep" (108). He spouts, "For his country! He had no country: this one I too repudiate" (108). It seems that De Spain even wants to kill himself with the gun, but Mrs. Grier stops him, and tells him to simply weep, and accept his son's courage. Mrs. Grier delivers wisdom to her fellow human who has lost a child saying, "All men are capable of shame, Just as all men are capable of courage and honor and sacrifice. And grief too" (108). She further tries to comfort him and convince him to stop looking for reasons why his son is dead saying that, "Maybe women are not supposed to know why their sons must die in battle; maybe all they are supposed to do is just grieve for them. But my son knew why ..." (109). She tries to convince De Spain to let go, and know that his son knew why too, just like Pete. This moment brings the crossover of class boundaries to a climax. The Griers have crossed the threshold of the locked door, and found

some common ground with De Spain. They share grief, and hopefully Mother Grier has convinced De Spain to also share her sense of acceptance of the value of his son's courage and sacrifice for his fellow human beings.

Faulkner zooms out wide at the conclusion of the story, as the Grier's go to the Museum, where the connections to others becomes clear. The Grier boy takes in with wonder the "pictures from all over the United States" (110). These paintings done by the hands of the "men and women and children who were the same people that we were even if their houses and barns were different and their fields worked different, with different things growing in them" (111). These are country folk paintings, and the Grier boy identifies with them, but he is also aware of the "big soft fading wheel" of the sunset that connects him to all the others humans of the world (114). He describes this connection to humanity, and to the many dead soldiers in powerful language, "It was like the wheel, like the sunset itself, hubbed at that little place that don't even show on a map, ... and spoking out in all the directions and touching them all, never a one too big for it to touch, never a one too little to be remembered ..." (114). He goes on thinking about, "the names of the men and the women who did the deeds, who lasted and endured and fought the battles" (114). The Grier boy believes that his big brother "Pete still is everywhere about the earth one among the fighters forever ..." (104). This shows how highly the Grier boy thinks of his brother's service, and that he understands the big picture view. This big picture is of a higher purpose. Faulkner compares the sacrifice of sons to the national and global cause to the sacrifice of God's only son, Jesus. This comparison fits into Faulkner frequent use of Biblical allusions in his works. Robert Alter writes of Faulkner's Biblical language, "The sternly grand language of

the King James Bible, as Melville had already demonstrated more than a decade earlier and as Faulkner and others would demonstrate in different ways later, was a way of giving American English a reach and resonance it would otherwise not have had” (Alter 63). Faulkner delivers this “reach and resonance” in a very short story that shows a range of humanity united in a common interest, which allows them to crossover class boundaries, and find common ground, in their shared humanity through grief, loss, and acceptance of the courage of sacrifice.

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