

Study Material

Dry September

Introduction:

William Faulkner:

"Dry September" is a short story by one of America's most notable and influential authors, **William Faulkner**. Faulkner is best known for his novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, and the short story "A Rose for Emily." Considered one of Faulkner's finest short pieces, "Dry September" was first published in 1931, in *Scribner's Magazine* in January, and then again in the collection *These Thirteen in September*.

Faulkner was an award magnet. On his trophy shelf we find two National Book Awards for fiction, a **Nobel Prize literature**, and two Pulitzer Prizes, just to name a few of the big ones. That doesn't mean, of course, that you have to like his work, though we hope you do.

Overview

Author

William Faulkner

Year Published

1931

Type

Short Story

Genre

Tragic

Perspective and Narrator

"Dry September" is told by a third-person limited narrator who describes the characters' pasts in detail.

Tense

"Dry September" is told in the past tense.

About the Title

"Dry September" refers to a month at the end of a summer in which there has been little rain. One of the characters states that the weather is enough to make a man do anything which suggests that the dry, hot summer has a role in the supposed crime and the events that happen during the story.

Socio-Political Context of Dry September:

The Civil War and Reconstruction: Racial Discrimination

The United States went through a period of major changes in the last half of the 1800s. **The American Civil War (1860–65)** was caused by the issues of states' rights and slavery. It affected the South for several decades after it ended. **Reconstruction (1865–77)** was a process in which the Southern states readjusted their governments so they could be fully readmitted to the Union. Southern farmers spent years working to get their farms running again. **The end of slavery required the development of a new system for farm labor.** Many farmers accepted a sharecropping system where landowners furnished most of the capital and the sharecroppers earned a portion of the harvest through their work on the farms.

After Reconstruction, the South still dealt with some disorder partly because many white Southerners distrusted African Americans. The United States granted the right to vote to African Americans through the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. Many states established laws that did not specifically oppose the Fifteenth Amendment but that ultimately restricted African Americans' voting rights.

The racial segregation and discrimination that began before [Faulkner](#) was born continued throughout his life and long after. These were major influences on many of Faulkner's works including "Dry September." He was opposed to segregation and discrimination and used his writing to raise awareness of the problems.

The United States saw a major population increase and the growth of industry during Reconstruction. Many people moved from smaller towns to urban areas. The country also began acquiring territories outside of the North American continent. It acquired Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Hawaiian islands (1898). It also briefly claimed the Philippines (1898) and attempted to expand into South America.

Discrimination Against Women

Women in the United States did not have many rights in the early 1900s. Only men could own property in most states, and women were not guaranteed the right to vote nationwide until 1920. Many men regarded women as material possessions who lacked the intelligence and strength to make decisions for themselves. These men also believed that women were more emotional than men.

Women were regarded as weaker than men and generally did not work outside the home especially after they were married. The stereotypical roles for women in these times were homemaker and mother. Society expected women to marry because it was widely believed that women could not be complete without a husband, home, and children. Society ridiculed or pitied any woman who either could not find a husband or chose to remain single.

United States Military Importance

The United States fought in several wars in the late 1800s and early 1900s. World War I (1914–18) was the most significant conflict of this era, and several other wars were fought in the name of imperialism (expanding the country by adding colonies and other new territories). The United States supported Cuba's struggle for independence in the Spanish-American War

(1898). That war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris of 1898. The Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam became territories of the United States as part of the same treaty.

The United States also secretly supported a revolution in Colombia (1903) that resulted in Panama's independence. The new Republic of Panama quickly negotiated a treaty with the United States for completion of the Panama Canal. The canal dramatically reduced the time it took for ships to travel between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Ships previously had to sail around South America.

World War I was also called the Great War and was significant because it was the first war that involved countries from around the world. The casualties of this war were unprecedented. The Central Powers included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey. The Allied Powers consisted of France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, and Japan. The United States entered the war in 1917 on the side of the Allies and tipped the balance of the conflict. The war finally ended in 1918 with the defeat of the Central Powers.

The importance of military power in the United States influenced Faulkner's determination to join the air force as well as his literary work. He included soldiers in several of his works, such as *Soldier's Pay* (1926). **A former soldier is also the main antagonist in "Dry September."**

African American:

African Americans (also referred to as Black Americans or Afro-Americans) are an ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any of the black racial groups of Africa.] The term African American generally denotes descendants of enslaved black people who are from the United States, while some recent black immigrants or their children may also come to identify as African-American or may identify differently.

African-American history began in the 17th century, with Africans from West Africa being sold to European slave traders and transported across the Atlantic to the Thirteen Colonies. After arriving in the Americas, they were sold as slaves to European colonists and put to work on plantations, particularly in the southern colonies. A few were able to achieve freedom through manumission or escape and founded independent communities before and during the American Revolution. **After the United States was founded in 1783, most black people continued to be enslaved, being mostly concentrated in the American South, with four million enslaved only liberated during and at the end of the Civil War in 1865.** Due to white supremacy, most were treated as second-class citizens. The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited U.S. citizenship to whites only, and only white men who owned property could vote. **These circumstances changed in Reconstruction, further development of the black community, participation in the great military conflicts of the United States, substantial migration out of the South, the elimination of legal racial segregation, and the civil rights movement which sought political and social freedom.** In 2008, Barack Obama became the first African American to be elected President of the United States.

White Goddess:

This powerful study of a cultural mentality that promotes rash, swift killings of black men is based on the Southern **White Goddess concept**. To understand fully the themes and setting of the story, we need to have some knowledge of this White Goddess concept, which applies not only to "Dry September," but also to any Southern story dealing with womanhood and rape, including Faulkner's *Light in August* and Harper Lee's popular *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

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

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

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

Story:

"Dry September" is the story of a rumor that Will Mayes, a black man, raped a white woman, Minnie Cooper. The tale explores the tragic effects of this rumour on some of the residents of Jefferson, Mississippi, the fictional town in which the story takes place.

"Dry September" is a short story by William Faulkner. **Published in 1931, it describes a lynch mob forming (despite ambiguous evidence) on a hot September evening to avenge an alleged (and unspecified) insult or attack upon a white woman by a black watchman, Will Mayes.** Told in five parts, the story includes the perspective of the rumored female victim, Miss Minnie Cooper, and of the mob's leader, **John McLendon**. It is one of Faulkner's shorter stories.

The story is divided into five sections: Sections I and III show the town's reaction to the rumor that Miss Minnie, a spinster, has been attacked by Will Mayes, a black man; Parts II and IV familiarize us with Miss Minnie's history and give us an inside view of her emotional state; and

Section V provides us with a glimpse of McLendon's home life and his rebellious tyranny over his wife.

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 of the Story:

Character	Description

Minnie Cooper	Minnie Cooper is a middle-aged single woman. She is slender and haggard. Read More
Hawkshaw	Hawkshaw is a barber in the town. He is middle-aged and thin. Read More
McClendon	McClendon is heavy-set and wears a white shirt, felt hat, and pistol. Read More
Will Mayes	Will Mayes is a black man who is the night watchman at the ice plant. Read More
The bank cashier	The bank cashier is Minnie Cooper's former suitor.
Butch	Butch is heavy-set and wears a sweat-stained shirt.
The drummer	The drummer (salesman) is a client in the barber shop. He goes with the other men to kill Will Mayes even though he is a newcomer to the town.
The narrator	The narrator is an unknown witness to the events of the story.
McClendon's wife	McClendon's wife is pale, weary, and passive.
Minnie's aunt	Minnie's aunt is gaunt and runs the household in which Minnie lives.
Minnie's mother	Minnie's mother is an invalid who stays in her room.
The townspeople	The townspeople are a group of people on the square gossiping about Will Mayes.

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.

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.

Summary

The Rumor

On a September evening during a drought, several men who have gathered in the town barber shop discuss [Minnie Cooper](#)'s accusation that [Will Mayes](#) did something to her. Minnie Cooper is a middle-aged white spinster. Will Mayes is an African American who has previously been in relatively good standing with the townspeople. No one in the barber shop is sure of exactly what happened. They believe Will Mayes either insulted or raped Minnie Cooper. The barber [Hawkshaw](#) believes that Will Mayes is innocent. He thinks Will Mayes is a good man. He also believes that older, unmarried women make up stories. He and the other men have a heated discussion.

Revenge

[McClendon](#) is a former soldier who does not think it matters whether a rumor going around town is true. Minnie Cooper is a middle-aged white woman who said that one of the town's African American men disrespected her in some manner. McClendon wants to make sure none of the other African American men in the town get any ideas about attacking white women. Hawkshaw the barber tries to get the other men in the barber shop to wait and find out what really happened. McClendon and the other men decide to go find Will Mayes and then kill him. Hawkshaw hesitates but joins them to continue to discourage them.

The men drive to the ice plant where Will Mayes works and drag him into the car. They drive away with him. Hawkshaw realizes that he cannot talk them out of killing Mayes and jumps out of the car on the way. He starts to walk back to town. When the car passes again, he sees that there is one less person in it.

Aftermath

The narrator describes Minnie Cooper's background and some past events. Minnie Cooper is in her late thirties and has never been married. She lives with her mother and aunt. She was popular as a young woman and had one suitor several years before. The townspeople accused Minnie Cooper and the bank cashier of adultery, and he moved away. She still gets dressed up every afternoon and walks around town.

Minnie Cooper continues her normal routine after she starts the rumor about Will Mayes attacking her. Minnie's friends help her get dressed to go to a movie around the same time the men in the barber shop are leaving to find Will Mayes. She overhears some men talking about what happened to her. They say that Will Mayes went on a little trip and observe that there are not any African Americans walking around town that evening. During the movie, Minnie begins laughing hysterically. Her friends take her home and put her to bed.

McClendon's wife is still awake waiting for him when McClendon arrives home at midnight. He reminds her that she should not sit up and wait for him. McClendon throws her across the room before he goes to bed.

Analysis

Racial Discrimination

"Dry September" is a realistic portrayal of a potential event in the South in the early 1900s. Some white people held the belief that African Americans were inferior. The rumor that Will Mayes attacked Minnie Cooper could have been handled by the police. McClendon and the men who willingly join him believe that Will Mayes does not deserve the same rights and legal process that a white man would deserve. In their eyes, he was not innocent until proven guilty, but guilty regardless of what actually happened. They believe that he should be punished simply because he could have done something to Minnie. If he did it, they would consider the punishment to be deserved. If he did not do it, it would be an example to any other black man who thought about attacking a white woman.

Faulkner used "Dry September" to spread awareness of racial discrimination. Will Mayes did not get a trial. He was not able to defend himself. The white men of the town did not even know the whole story of the rumor. They only knew that Will Mayes was accused of some unknown act. Will Mayes was considered a lesser human being because of the color of his skin, and the men thought a rumor was enough for them to pass judgment. "Dry September" paints a picture of the reality that many African Americans lived during the 1920s and surrounding decades.

Gender Discrimination

"Dry September" touches on the problematic treatment of women in the early 1900s. Minnie Cooper is an unmarried woman in her thirties. Most women in that time period were married in their late teens or at least by their early twenties. The townspeople consider Minnie to be sad, and they pity her because of her single status. In his defense of Will Mayes, Hawkshaw says, "I leave it to you fellows if them ladies that get old without getting married don't have notions that a man can't—." He believes that older unmarried women make up stories about sex. He is admirably defending Mayes, but discriminating against women in order to do it.

Vigilante Justice

Faulkner uses "Dry September" as a way to show that everyone has the right to be treated and heard fairly. McClendon and the other men felt that they knew what was right before they heard any of the facts. Minnie's friends did not even know exactly what it was that Minnie had accused Will Mayes of doing to her. McClendon and his associates carried out vigilante justice and murdered a man without knowing the facts. Faulkner warns against rushing to judgment and carrying out vigilante justice with his portrayal of the events in "Dry September."

Important Lines of the Text:

1.

It had gone like a fire in dry grass: the rumor, the story, whatever it was.

[The narrator](#)

The summer heat plays a large role in the story. Here it is used to describe the way the rumor about Will Mayes spreads through the town.

2.

Except it wasn't Will Mayes.

[Hawkshaw](#)

Hawkshaw makes it clear from the beginning that he believes Will Mayes is a good man and did not do anything to Minnie Cooper.

3.

She's about forty, I reckon. She ain't married.

[Hawkshaw](#)

Hawkshaw thinks that spinsters make up stories about sex. People in the early 1900s including Hawkshaw believed that a woman's primary goal in life should be to get married and have children. They pitied and shamed unmarried women. Hawkshaw lets the other men know that he doesn't believe Minnie Cooper because she is not married.

4.

It's this durn weather. It's enough to make a man do anything. Even to her.

[Butch](#)

Several men think that the weather is to blame for what happened to Minnie Cooper. Even though they do not know exactly what happened, they want to find a reason to suspect that Will Mayes raped Minnie Cooper.

5.

Find out the truth first. I know Will Mayes.

[Hawkshaw](#)

Hawkshaw defends Will Mayes. The other men think that Mayes is guilty even without evidence, but Hawkshaw wants them to find out what happened before they take any action.

6.

Well, are you going to ... let a black son rape a white woman?

[McClendon](#)

McClendon arrives at the barber shop. He does not really join the conversation but demands action instead. By insisting without evidence that Will Mayes raped Minnie Cooper, he assumes the worst about Mayes and does not want to wait to find out the truth.

7.

Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?

[McClendon](#)

McClendon does not care whether Will Mayes really attacked or insulted Minnie Cooper. McClendon wants to use Will Mayes as an example in case any of the black men in the town even think about attacking a white woman.

8.

I can't let ...

Hawkshaw

Hawkshaw follows the other men when they leave the barber shop. He tells the other barbers that he'll be back as soon as he can. He begins to say that he can't let the men do what they're planning but is in too much of a hurry to finish the sentence before he runs out.

9.

Had enabled her for a time to ride upon the crest of the town's social life.

The narrator

The narrator describes Minnie Cooper. She was popular when she was younger. Her popularity did not last as she aged because of her social class. She never married or had a serious suitor.

10.

Then the town began to see her ... with the cashier in the bank.

The narrator

Minnie Cooper did not have any serious suitors until her friends were all married and had children of their own. She dated the bank cashier for a while.

11.

Usually by that hour there would be the scent of whisky on her breath.

The narrator

The bank cashier whom Minnie Cooper was dating moved away and returned to town once a year. Her friends and neighbors watched for him and let Minnie know how he was doing. She drank apparently as a way to deal with her loss.

12.

Not here. Get him into the car.

McClendon

The men from the barber shop go to Will Mayes' workplace and call for him. One of the men wants to kill him on the spot when he comes outside. McClendon does not want to do anything there. He wants to go somewhere where they cannot be seen so no one can witness what they are about to do.

13.

There were four people in it and Butch was not on the running board.

The narrator

Hawkshaw jumps out of the car and starts walking home when he realizes he cannot deter the men from murdering Will Mayes. Later he sees the car returning. Butch is no longer riding on the outside of the car. He is sitting inside where Will Mayes had been. Hawkshaw did not see what happened to him, but he is sure that the men murdered Mayes.

14.

He went on a little trip.

The townspeople

Minnie Cooper overhears the townspeople talking when she goes to the movies with her friends. The men say that Will Mayes went on a trip and there are not any black people on the square. The townspeople know that McClendon and the other men are murdering Will Mayes and do not seem troubled by it.

15.

He released her and half struck, half flung her across the chair.

The narrator

McClendon gets home at midnight. McClendon's wife is still awake, and he is angry. He has told her before not to wait up for him. This last scene shows that he is a violent man. Gender discrimination was as rampant as racial discrimination in the town, so the townspeople would probably accept McClendon's violent actions toward his wife just as they accepted what he and the other men did to Will Mayes.

Symbols of the Story

Razor

A razor might normally be considered a symbol of violence because of its sharp edge, but in "Dry September" the barber [Hawkshaw](#)'s razor is more of a symbol of restraint and order. Hawkshaw physically holds the drummer down in the chair and holds the razor in place as he tries to talk [McClendon](#), Butch, the drummer, and some other men into seeing reason. The drummer does get up after a few minutes of conversation. The men in the barber shop forget restraint and order at this point. The barber wipes the razor before he leaves to continue to try to stop a murder. The fact that he takes the time to clean it reveals that he shows restraint even if most of the other men do not.

Heat and Drought

The title "Dry September" shows that heat and drought are an important part of the story and symbolize the racial tension in the town. The rumor that [Will Mayes](#) has committed some unknown act against [Minnie Cooper](#) spreads "like a fire in dry grass." One of the men says that the weather is "enough to make a man do anything." The narrator mentions the sweat on the characters several times. [McClendon](#) and Butch use "hell" several times in their dialog. [Faulkner](#) ties most mentions of heat, sweat, and hell to characters who are directly

involved in the murder of Will Mayes or to the murder itself. Faulkner uses the heat as a catalyst for the events of the night, just as racial discrimination is the cause.

The narrator's reports of the long, dry summer symbolize that the prejudices held by McClendon and other townspeople have always been present. The narrator also states that the fan in the barber shop "stirred, without freshening" the air. Some people in the early 1900s attempted to make steps towards reducing racial discrimination just as the fan attempted to reduce the heat. Racial discrimination and the air in the barber shop remained and were only slightly affected by the attempts at racial equality and the fan.

Pistol

[McClendon](#)'s pistol is a symbol of the violence in "Dry September." The narrator first mentions the pistol when McClendon leaves the barber shop to look for [Will Mayes](#): "From his hip pocket protruded the butt of a heavy automatic pistol." In that scene, the pistol is a symbol of the violence to come when the men go to look for Will Mayes. The story does not state specifically that McClendon uses the pistol or that the men actually kill Will Mayes, but there are strong indications that both happen. "Dry September" begins with the line "Through the bloody September twilight" which implies that there is more blood and violence than the reader sees in the story. [Hawkshaw](#) sees McClendon and the other men driving in a car back toward town, and he sees that "There were four people in it and Butch was not on the running board" even though there had been five people left inside when Hawkshaw jumped out of the car earlier. "Dry September" specifically states that McClendon has his pistol when the men leave the barber shop to show that he means to be violent on their trip to find Will Mayes.

At the end of the story, McClendon's pistol symbolizes the violence earlier in the story as well as the violence toward McClendon's wife. McClendon "half struck, half flung her across the chair." He then went to the bedroom and "took the pistol from his hip and laid it on the table." [Faulkner](#) makes it clear that McClendon has his pistol from the time he instigates action against Will Mayes until he arrives home that night both beginning and ending the violence.

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.

Themes of the Story:

Racial Discrimination (10 Marks)

"Dry September" centers on the lynching of an African American man in revenge for a rumor that no one even knows the details of. This story would have been very different if [Will Mayes](#) were white or if [Minnie Cooper](#) had also been African American. The white men of the town discriminate against Will Mayes because of his skin color and feel that their discrimination is justified. The other townspeople know that Will Mayes is gone and most likely dead. They notice that "There's not a Negro on the square" after [McClendon](#) and his men go to see Will Mayes that evening. They know what happened and choose to ignore it. The

casual way they refer to Will Mayes' death shows that the majority of the townspeople do not believe the discrimination and murder were wrong.

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.

Violence

Faulkner's story brings awareness to the issue of violence. The main event in "Dry September" is the murder of [Will Mayes](#). [McClendon](#) and his men drag Mayes from his workplace and take him to an abandoned field. Faulkner does not describe the murder itself. The reader learns that the men return without Mayes when [Hawkshaw](#) sees the car returning toward town and notes, "There were four people in it and Butch was not on the running board. McClendon still has his pistol when he returns home at midnight and "laid it on the table beside the bed."

The violence is not only in the murder of Will Mayes. No one knows the specifics of [Minnie Cooper](#)'s accusation. Minnie could have said that Will Mayes mildly insulted her, or she could have said that Mayes attacked her. The men at the barber shop assume the most violent possibility. Their baseless assumption that Will Mayes attacked Minnie Cooper shows their tendency to assume the worst and most violent story.

Faulkner includes violence at the end of the story. McClendon is not a calm, peaceful man even in his own home. He verbally and physically abuses his wife when he arrives home after murdering Will Mayes. McClendon's wife does not seem to be surprised, and the reader can assume that he has abused her before.

Vigilante Justice (10 Marks)

"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 Faulkner’s story, then, is not a means for justice at all, but rather the preservation of a specific (and deeply prejudiced) societal order.

The Negative Effect of Rumors

"Dry September" shows the extreme effects that rumors can have. The men in the barber shop really have no idea what [Minnie Cooper](#) said about [Will Mayes](#). The narrator says, "The rumor, the story, whatever it was. Something about Miss Minnie Cooper and a Negro. Attacked, insulted, frightened: none of them, gathered in the barber shop ... knew exactly what had happened." It is possible that someone overheard her say something innocent and made assumptions or even changed the story altogether. [Faulkner](#) never writes what actually happened between Minnie Cooper and Will Mayes to prove a point: when someone starts a rumor, it is impossible to predict what will happen because of it.
