

On Either Side of the Color Line: Incest, the Question of Exploitation, and *Go Down, Moses*

OHRI Naoko

Introduction

Incest is one of the important motifs in William Faulkner's novels. Not until recently, however, did the incest between L. Q. Carothers MacCaslin and Tomasina in *Go Down, Moses* (1942) attract any significant attention. For example, Constance Hill Hall's *Incest in Faulkner* (1986) does not include their coupling (Davis, T. 93). Until the 1980s, most of the criticism of *Go Down, Moses* did no more than classify it as a novel or a story series because of its unusual form (Wagner-Martin 5); under these circumstances it is not unexpected that their sexual relationship did not receive more substantial attention. Nevertheless, it is surprising that it has been overlooked for such a long time, for it is "the only example in Faulkner's work of consummated incest" (Chabrier 129).

The reasons why the case of incest in *Go Down, Moses* has gone unnoticed lie in the couple's unique characteristics. One is that they are a parent and a child—a striking difference from Faulkner's other incestuous couples. The more famous and typical couples, or occasionally trios, are all siblings such as Quentin and Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Charles Bon and Judith and Henry Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and Horace and Narcissa Benbow in *Sanctuary* (1931). Among the numerous cases of sibling incest that are characteristic of Faulkner's work, an isolated case of parent-child incest in *Go Down, Moses* might have been inconspicuous. Although Karl F. Zender also addressed its distinctiveness in the 1990s (Zender 755), most of the criticism of incest in Faulkner, including John T. Irwin's *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* (1975), still shows a preoccupation with incest between siblings, especially with that between brother and sister¹.

The other reason why the incest in *Go Down, Moses* has been neglected is that Carothers and Tomasina belong to different races. Therefore, their sexual relationship

has been well recognized as an example of consummated miscegenation². Furthermore, some critics did not believe Carothers' paternity of Tomasina until Faulkner's letter revealing their blood relationship was discovered in 1999 (Polk 107). The tendency to take their coupling seriously as a case of miscegenation may come from the way Isaac (Ike) MacCaslin, the protagonist of the novel, looked at it. In "Delta Autumn," he encounters an abandoned lover of Carothers (Ross) Edmonds, the sixth head of his family. The words Ike hurls at the nameless woman, who seems almost white, clearly show what kind of carnal sins he assumes Carothers, his grandfather, committed: "You're a nigger!" (GDM 344). Even after her origin as a descendant of Tomey's Terrel, Tomasina's son, is revealed, he still dwells on her nonwhiteness. "Marry: a man in your own race. That's the only salvation for You—For a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait. Marry a Black man" (346). His antipathy toward her hybridity demonstrates that of all Carothers' sins, nothing horrified him more than miscegenation. To be exact, incest was, for him, not the most hideous sin his grandfather committed (Hoffman 169-71).

When looking at some features shared between two of Faulkner's novels, Eric J. Sundquist argues that *Go Down, Moses* evolved from *Absalom, Absalom!* by disintegrating the barrier that was preventing the consummation of miscegenation as incest (Sundquist 132). Nevertheless, why did incest in Faulkner only become a reality between a parent and child, who also had the relationship of master and slave? To seek an answer to this question, I will look at the father-daughter relationship between Carothers and Tomasina and examine their coupling from the perspective of feminist psychiatry and anthropology, which made clinical contributions to the clarification of incest in the 1970s-1980s. By introducing historico-jurisprudential studies of slavery into Faulkner criticism, Thadious M. Davis reads into the sexual dynamics in the novel, which were peculiar to the American South before the Civil War, and used to actualize incest as miscegenation. My project is to reconsider these dynamics as the culmination of gender asymmetry in the incest taboo called "the traffic in women" (Rubin 175). I aim to describe how incest between father and daughter, who are also unusually owner and property, is an exaggeration of the tolerance for incest under certain circumstances

inherent in “the law of exogamy” (Herman 59), which requires people to form networks of kinship.

Blood Relations \neq Kinship Relations

“His own daughter His own daughter. No No Not even him” (GDM 259). Speculating that Carothers had a son by Tomasina from fragmentary entries in the old plantation ledgers of the family, Ike could not help being shocked by his grandfather’s “ruthlessness” (260). A question arises here: is it not inconvenient for a father to have sexual relations with his daughter? In exogamous societies, where family groups are demanded to exchange members through marriage, a man cannot possibly derive benefit from incest because of its inability to create kinship relations. In fact, in the American South, incest was so feared that it was placed beside miscegenation as one of “the twin prohibitions” (King 126). According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the influential anthropologist, marriage outside the family group governed by the incest taboo is the fundamental form of gift-giving that develops friendly relations among people. By requiring the exchange of people as well as objects and thereby creating not only reliance but also kinship relations, marriage serves to bind people more strongly than the exchange of objects does. “The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift, and it is clearly this aspect, too often unrecognized, which allows its nature to be understood” (Lévi-Strauss 481). If that is so, those who break it would lose their share of the social alliance that the rule guarantees. Taking women within the family for sexual need ought to be against men’s own interests.

Why then did Carothers not hesitate to make a sexual conquest of his own daughter? The answer rests in the master-slave relationship between them. Tomasina was less his daughter than one of his slaves because her mother, Eunice, was his slave concubine. Female slaves were exposed to unrestrained sexual exploitation since the system and culture supporting slavery encouraged slave owners to use them sexually. By making sexual use of and fathering children by those women, slave owners could

satisfy their sexual desire, and, at the same time, gain the same profit as they could from “breeding” slave couples; that is to say, the labor force reproduced itself (Davis, T. 90, Davis, A. 6-7, Clinton 203-06). Moreover, slaves were legally defined as without will, and, therefore, sexual aggression against female slaves could not be recognized as rape (Davis, T. 112-13). Although not all intercourse may have been violent, it is a sentimental judgment to expect, as Ike does, that “some sort of love” (GDM 258) determined sexual relations between master and slave (Davis, T. 96-98, Davis, A. 25-26, Clinton 212-13). In relationships with an overwhelming power imbalance, sexual exploitation or abuse hardly needs overt violence or coercion. It can be said that white men’s sexual desire itself, “the backyard temptation” in Lillian Smith’s words (Smith 116), was the product of a sexual culture that eroticized domination, and was shaped by the need to justify the exploitation of enslaved labor. Catherine Clinton explains the psychological effects that the hierarchal social structure of the Old South, built by getting the best value out of race and gender, had on its white founders’ sexuality: “Within the complex sexual scenario of plantation society, power eclipsed other themes. It is not excessive to speculate that domination shaped erotic imagination, arousal, objects of desire, and modes of gratification. Slaveowners incorporated violence, actual or implied, into their pattern of sexual satisfaction” (Clinton 222).

Under those circumstances, even slave women related to their owners by blood could not always escape sexual victimization. Given that Southern criminal law is said to have traditionally been relatively tolerant of incest (Chabrier 130-31), it was never applied to interracial breaches. The reason was that slaves were not defined as humans, but as chattels like livestock; therefore, they had no legal right to be members of the family. Besides, family law at that time left them out of consideration (Davis, T. 99-100). Even if they took an active part as “studs” in breeding slaves, it was easy for slave owners to deny the offspring were their own. This must have given them a good excuse to make sexual use of even their daughters or sisters born in slavery. In fact, it was not unusual for slaves, who were not family members but family possessions, to be inherited not only as a labor force, but also as a sexual luxury (Clinton 218-19). Thus some masters often took the liberty of using their fathers’ concubines, and others were

not afraid to take both slave mothers and daughters for sexual use (Fox-Genovese 9, Davis, T. 99-100). In view of these instances, it can easily be understood how mixed-blood girls like Tomasina, born in slave concubinage, were vulnerable to the sexual advances of their father-owners or half brothers.

To sum up, Carothers' incestuous violation of Tomasina was enabled by her lack of membership in his family. The incest taboo or law of exogamy rewards people for the exchange of their family members, not for that of their family property. Therefore, even if he had married his slave daughter off, Carothers would not have gotten any kinship relations from her marriage. In other words, Tomasina, as a piece of his property, had no exchange value in the market for marriage. Although they were related by blood, she was ineligible for membership in his family; therefore she would never have a market value in marriage. Thus, the exogamy law did not protect her from incestuous molestation. For girls or women who have no value in marital exchange, the law does not give its followers any reward; on the other hand, it does not give its offenders any penalty. In that case, nothing prevents those females from being taken by their own fathers or (half) brothers. Consequently, other than the legacy of 1,000 dollars left to his son who was also his grandson (GDM 258), Carothers showed no compunction exploiting his daughter for his own sexual pleasure.

The Rule of the Father

Curiously enough, in *Go down, Moses*, daughters who did have exchange value in the marriage market unlike Tomasina, namely, white women with membership in their fathers' families, were also treated like objects to be owned. "Was" discloses the structure of a special kind of marital exchange by comically revealing how Ike's parents' relationship began. Its third section focuses on a game of cards between Amodeus (Buddy) MacCaslin and his neighbor Hubert Beauchamp that was supposed to be repeatedly played until Buddy's twin brother Theophilus (Buck) gave up his "bastion of bachelorhood" (Muhlenfeld 201) to "win" Hubert's helplessly unmarried younger sister Sophonsiba (GDM 23). The game is doubly noteworthy because her limited chances of marriage are at stake and it deals with them on almost the same level as the ownership

of Tennie, a slave girl of the Beauchamps who is Tomey's Terrel's sweetheart. In some ways, Tennie finds herself in a more advantageous position than that of her mistress who is placed under the definitive condition of the wager. Hubert partly shares Buddy's view, and they lay the wager on the premise that they can no longer keep the pair of slave lovers separate from each other. While Sophonsiba cannot get married to Buck unless her brother wins the bet, Tennie can live with her lover no matter which player wins. In addition, Hubert has no plan to provide a dowry for his sister, even if he wins, and ends up disposing of Tennie without charge by losing the bet. At this point, Sophonsiba's value as an exchange good for marriage is too low to be readily distinguished from that of her maid in trade transactions. The mistress and maid are exchanged no differently between the men of the Beauchamp and MacCaslin families.

Why does Sophonsiba have to be called an exchange good? The reason lies in the fact that the exchange of people in marriage is not conducted sex-neutrally. In marital exchange, men can act as givers and receivers, but women only have the role of gifts-given (Lévi-Strauss 115). Women's role is, according to Gayle Rubin, a feminist anthropologist, a "conduit" of a relationship between men or, in the more sophisticated language of Eve K. Sedgwick, the medium of "male homosocial desire." By requiring the exchange of women not for men, but between men in making kinship relations, the law of exogamy confers the benefits of social alliance only on men (Rubin 174).

Although her role as a woman is to be given, Ike's nameless wife recklessly attempts to participate in marriage as a partner. One evening, when she finds out that Ike is building their new house in her ignorance, she decides to show him her naked body for the first time and thereby tries to get him to promise that he will take over his family's plantation (GDM 297-301). She strives to buy the land in exchange for her nakedness but fails to understand that as a gift for him she may not concurrently be the person he is dealing with. Regardless of whether he had seen her body in the nude or not, he should have already made her his by then. The person he was dealing with in their marriage is her father who was also his "partner" in carpentry (296). Where and in what house she will live is determined by an agreement between her father and husband, her giver and receiver, and no matter how much she loves her husband, it

makes no difference to her position as a gift-given. Since she is not allowed to be a giver or a receiver, he cannot possibly accept her proposition and, the consequence is that she sacrifices her feminine pride for nothing. The love scene of the newlywed couple, praised as “the most passionate in all of Faulkner’s fiction” (Muhlenfeld 203), is closed by her hysterical laughter when she suffers a destined crushing defeat in the structure of marriage. “And that’s all. That’s all from me. If this dont [sic] get you that son you talk about, it wont [sic] be mine” (GDM 300-01).

It is obvious that both Sophonsiba and Ike’s wife are treated as the property of their kinsmen whose wills are negligible (Dickerson 418-21). Although it is a privilege of white women, their exchange value in marriage does not make their position very different from that of female slaves. This understanding leaves us with a new question about how women who were legitimated but still owned by their fathers were able to avoid involvement in incest. The rights of the ownership of women provide the vital clue as to why and how incest occurs.

First, we will look at the actual conditions of incest. Today, it is recognized as a form of sexual abuse of children most often reported between fathers and daughters. Social surveys of the sexual experiences of both sexes, including the well-known Kinsey reports, have been carried out since 1940, but it was not until the 1970s that surveys which targeted incest cases were worked on seriously. Summarizing the findings of the five major surveys of either kind, Judith Lewis Herman, a feminist psychiatrist, illustrates how frequently incest occurs. The former surveys contained the revelations that 1) some adults make children their sexual objects, 2) most of the adults committing such acts are male, whereas most of the children victimized are female, and 3) such acts are sometimes committed within the family³. It is the latter surveys, however, that revealed that the occurrence of incest follows the same pattern as the sexual abuse of children, in which most cases have female children as victims and male adults as perpetrators⁴. Without forgetting that brothers, uncles, and grandfathers can also be perpetrators, the findings of the surveys agreed that the great majority of incest occurs between parents and children and most of the cases occur between fathers and daughters (Herman 11-19)⁵.

The reason why incest almost always occurs between fathers and daughters but almost never occurs between mothers and sons can be found in the male supremacy of the incest taboo. "In patriarchal societies," Herman concludes, "including Western society, the rights of ownership and exchange of women within the family are vested primarily in the father. These rights find their most complete expression in the father's relationship with his daughter" (60). According to her, the effectiveness of the incest taboo is due not to the rule of the gift but to "territorial behavior" among men in the family. In this case, what is forbidden is the sexual appropriation of women subject to other kinsmen. Whereas every other female relative belongs to other men, the daughter belongs exclusively to the father, which is why incest is most strenuously prohibited with the mother but, on the other hand, is almost overlooked with the daughter. Between father and daughter is the place where men's rights of ownership of women are maximized because the rule is not reinforced by sexual rivalry among men (60-62).

Taking into account the absoluteness of a father's power over his daughters, it is difficult to think that only white women could always escape the danger of incest. It may sound anachronistic to class the realities and structure of incest in the latter half of the 20th century with those in the American South one and a half centuries before; nevertheless, "[p]atriarchy was," as Catherine Clinton concludes, "the bedrock upon which the slave society was founded, and slavery exaggerated the pattern of subjugation that patriarchy had established" (Clinton 6). If that were so, incest in the slave South would be the furthest extreme of, but cannot be very different from, that in our own time. In Faulkner's novels, there is at least one example of white women who fall victim to incestuous fathers. Milly Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!*, who was born to an unmarried mother who supposedly died in a Memphis brothel, bears old Thomas Sutpen a daughter out of wedlock. In his provocative, postcolonial reading of Faulkner, Eduard Glissant, a writer from Martinique in the West Indies, assumes that Sutpen himself may be Milly's father (Glissant 134-36)⁶. The sexual coupling of the alleged father and daughter, who remind us of Carothers and Tomasina, suggests that excuses to make sexual use of young female relatives, without difference in the color of skin, were not so hard to find in the antebellum South.

Conclusion

Now it can be fully understood what an appropriate setting Faulkner's incest finds for its realization. Carothers' sexual domination of Tomasina is on one hand an exceptional breach of the incest taboo possible only under the sexual dynamics of slavery, but, on the other hand, is a typical instance of the anticipated breakdown of the rule, seen in light of the mechanism of incest occurring, in which the father's unrivaled power plays a pivotal role. Unlike *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go down, Moses* keeps white women away from incest. However, by depicting all women as the property of men, it suggests that incest between father and daughter, who are also master and slave, is not a deviation from patriarchal family norms but their magnification through the racial order. It does not matter that incest in Faulkner is mostly between brothers and sisters. However, it is important that after a great deal of trial and error between brothers and sisters, the novelist needed to look for another place for its first and last realization. If that is so, among the many cases of incest represented by him, that in *Go down, Moses* undeniably holds an especially important position. Carothers' sexual taking of Tomasina should be ranked as an archetypal, not a borderline, case of incest in Faulkner's work.

*The first version of this article was written in Japanese and read at the 82nd General Meetings of the English Literary Society of Japan held at Kobe University on May 29 and 30, 2010.

Bibliography

Clinton, Catherine. *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Chabrier, Gwendolyn. *Faulkner's Families: A Southern Saga*. New York: Gordian Press, 1993.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race & Class*. 1981. London: The Women's Press, 2001.

Davis, Thadious M. *Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner's Go Down*,

- Moses. Durham and London: Duke U. P., 2003.
- Dickerson, Mary Jane. "Toward Self-Possession: Women in *Go Down, Moses*." *Women's Studies* 22 (1993): 417-27.
- Duvall, John N. *Faulkner's Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw, and Unspeakable Communities*. Austin: U. of Texas P., 1990.
- Faulkner, William. *Go Down, Moses*. 1942. Reprint, New York: Vintage International Edition, 1990.
- . *Absalom, Absalom!* 1936. Reprint, New York: Vintage International Edition, 1990.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina P., 1988.
- Glissant, Eduard. *Faulkner, Mississippi*. Trans. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear. Chicago and London: The U. of Chicago P., 1999.
- Hall, Constance Hill. *Incest in Faulkner: A Metaphor for the Fall*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Father-Daughter Incest*. 1981. Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 2000.
- Hoffman, Daniel. *Faulkner's Country Matters: Folklore and Fable in Yoknapatawpha*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U. P., 1989.
- Irwin, John T. *Doubling and Incest/ Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U. P., 1975.
- Jerlen, Myra. *Class and Character in Faulkner's South*. New York: Columbia U. P., 1976.
- King, Richard H. *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955*. New York: Oxford U. P., 1980.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. James Hale Bell and John Richard von Sturmer. 1949. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- Muhlenfeld, Elisabeth. "The Distaff Side: The Women of *Go Down, Moses*." Arthur F. Kinney. Ed. *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The McCaslin Family*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990. 198-212.
- Polk, Noel. "How the Negroes [sic] became McCaslins too...": A New Faulkner Letter." *Southern Culture* (Fall 1999): 103-08.

- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex." Reyna Reiter. Ed. *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975. 157-210.
- Sedgwick, Eve K. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia U. P., 1985.
- Scheel, Kathleen M. "Incest, Repression, and Repetition-Compulsion: The Case of Faulkner's Temple Drake." *Mosaic* 30-4 (1997): 39-55.
- Smith, Lillian. *Killers of the Dream*. 1949. New York: W. W. Norton & C., 1994.
- Sundquist, Eric J. *Faulkner: The House Divided*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U. P., 1983.
- Takeuchi, Masaya. "Darl's Arson in *As I Lay Dying*: An Incestuous Desire for His Mother/ An Indictment of the Postwar South." *The William Faulkner Journal of Japan on Internet* 8 (2006): 104-12.
- Vickery, Olga W. *The Novels of William Faulkner*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U. P., 1964.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. Ed. *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*. New York: Cambridge U. P., 1996.
- Zender, Karl F. "Faulkner and the Politics of Incest." *American Literature* 70-4 (December 1998): 739-65.

About the Author

OHRI Naoko is a doctoral candidate in the Division of Comparative Literature and Cultures at Ochanomizu University (e-mail: oori@rhythm.ocn.ne.jp). One of her publications is, in Japanese, "Not in a Bedroom but in a Courtroom': On Precarious Kinship in Melville's *Billy Budd*' in *American Literature* 67 published by the Tokyo Branch of the American Literature Society of Japan in 2006.

Notes

¹ A few exceptions are Olga W. Vickery's *The Novels of William Faulkner* and Takeuchi Masaya's "Darl's Arson in *As I Lay Dying*." They find a son's incestuous desire for his

mother in *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Lately, there is a marked tendency to read a subtext of father-daughter incest in *Sanctuary*, such as John N. Duvall's *Faulkner's Marginal Couple* and Kathleen M. Scheel's "Incest, Repression, and Repetition-Compulsion."

² Most notable is Myra Jerlen's *Class and Character in Faulkner's South*, which recognizes *Go Down, Moses* as a candid disclosure of blacks' contribution of blood to the making of whites' family lines.

³ Those surveys are as follows: Carney Landis' *Sex in Development* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), Alfred C. Kinsey et al.'s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953), Judson Landis' "Experiences of 500 Children with Adult Sexual Deviance" (*Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement* 30, 1956: 91-109), John Gagnon's "Female Child Victims of Sex Offences" (*Social Problems* 13, 1965: 176-92), and David Finkelhor's *Sexually Victimized Children* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

⁴ Those surveys are as follows: S. Kirson Weinberg's *Incest Behavior* (New York: Citadel Press, 1955), Herbert Maisch's *Incest* (New York: Stein & Day, 1972), Nancyz Lukianowics' "Incest" (*British Journal of Psychiatry* 120, 1972: 201-12), Karin Meiselman's *Incest* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), and Blair Justice and Rita Justice's *The Broken Taboo* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1979).

⁵ Accordingly, as perpetrators fathers overwhelm mothers. Mother-son incest occurs at the same rare intervals (average 2.8%) as father-son incest does (average 2.6%).

⁶ Milly's mother Melicent Jones appears only in the "Chronology" and "Genealogy" following the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* Glissant claims, however, that her oddly belated appearance is the very key to the mystery deliberately hidden behind the novel. Certainly, it is no wonder that, in his madness for a male heir, Sutpen resorted to reproduction by his own flesh and blood, considering how dreadfully he abhorred "the contamination by black blood." Moreover, the assumption furnishes an intelligent reason why, in the morning of Milly's childbirth, Wash Jones, her grandfather and Sutpen's handyman, exploded and killed her and her baby girl with a scythe, as well as his merciless master. I wish to thank Professor Tanaka Hisao for his calling my attention to Glissant's stimulating argument and the great resemblance which Carothers' sexual taking of Tomasina has to Sutpen's taking of Milly.