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 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 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 Meyes 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.