

Kim and Company

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Clever Title Later

William Styron tells the story of Paul Whitehurst's development from boyhood to manhood in *A Tidewater Morning*. Rather than the normal chronological order, however, he tells it out of order in three short vignettes that delve into three encounters with death: as a man at war, as a boy seeing the death of a stranger up close and personal, and finally as an adolescent losing his mom to cancer. Though the book is clearly about Paul, the second vignette is entitled "Shadrach" and much of the focus is on an old, black man who has returned to the plantation where he was a slave and where he wishes to be buried. Shadrach's death is a strangely peaceful and natural death which contrasts with the fearful, painful encounters in the other two vignettes. Styron uses Shadrach to illustrate that death is a fact of life that we must cope with in a way that allows our memories to strengthen us.

Styron makes Shadrach a character foil to the protagonist Paul. Paul is characterized as a 10-year-old white boy who lives a life of relative privilege in the midst of the Great Depression (33). He points out the differences between himself and the Dabneys lower-class status by referring to "the bourgeois aspirations and gentility which were my own inheritance" (44). Shadrach stands in stark contrast to this young white child in both color—"[he] was a blackness of such intensity that it

reflected no light at all”—and his ripe old age of 99 years. Styron makes this contrast clear in the description of Shadrach: “It was a blissful grin, which revealed deathly purple gums, the yellowish stumps of two teeth” and “a hand warped and wrinkled with age: the bones moved beneath the black skin in clear skeletal outline.” Unlike Paul’s upper-middle class existence, Shadrach is an ex-slave who was likely “set loose, like most of his brothers and sisters, into another slavery perhaps more excruciating than the sanctioned bondage,” which history and Styron tell us included “poverty and hunger and humiliation, of the crosses burning in the night, the random butchery, and, above all, the unending dread” (73). Styron has clearly designed these characters as complete opposites in many ways and placed them side by side in the middle of the book to make a point.

The hint to his point is the way Styron connects Shadrach and Paul through their loneliness. Shadrach is physically alone, having outlived all of his family: “Ah was dibested of all mah plenty” (57). At the end of his life, he is left with no one, even calling on the generations-removed descendants of his previous owner to fulfill his last wish of dying on Dabney land. Likewise, Styron portrays Paul as alone, both physically and emotionally. He wishes he were a Dabney himself as he “envied the sheer teeming multitude of the Dabneys—there were seven children—which made [his] status as an only child seem so effete, spoiled, and lonesome” (44). Later in the book when his mother is dying, Paul describes the desperation of being alone: “In my room I felt as alone as if I were in a dungeon. The heat was malign, smothering, and I gasped like a fish in the darkness” (92). He contrasts this with the neighbor

family who even slept together after the loss of a child, “holding on to one another, preventing even sleep from separating them in their mourning” (92). Styron establishes this connection between these foils in order to draw the readers’ attention to how each copes. Not only are they different physically, but the way they handle their loneliness is a stark contrast.

Styron portrays Shadrach as what we should all aspire to be. Certainly Shadrach lived a hard life as a slave, former slave, sharecropper, and second-class citizen. Certainly outliving his wife, children, and even grandchildren means he suffered more than his fair share of grief. However, when Shadrach comes to the end of his life, he doesn’t fall into an abyss of desperation. The millpond incident gives us insight into the way Shadrach may have coped with adversity in life. Perhaps “his long and solitary journey from the Deep South had been a quest to find this millpond and for a recaptured glimpse of childhood, [or] it might just as readily have been a final turning of his back on a life of suffering” (73). Regardless of which it was, Styron characterizes Shadrach as a man facing his life and problems head-on. Styron shows us a man who doesn’t let his past dictate his present and future. Even “as a small boy at the edge of the millpond [Paul] saw Shadrach not as one who had fled darkness, but as one who had searched for light refracted within a flashing moment of remembered childhood” (73-74). That memory brings him peace. He uses his memories to bring him comfort and remember the innocence of an easier time. And Shadrach actively seeks out a community of people. He doesn’t hide himself away and wait for death to overtake him. Instead, he walks 600 miles to find a group he

used to be a part of so he can die surrounded by a type of family, with a young girl holding his hand.

Styron portrays Paul, on the other hand, as an example of what we shouldn't do. For instance, Paul does not cope with his problems in a healthy way.

Unlike Shadrach, Paul's past has a negative impact on his present and future.