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Sanctuary: Temple as a Parrot

Ulf Kirchdorfer

Some instances of Faulkner's making use of animals to record and explore human nature are by now well-documented, such as the hunt for the bear in *Go Dawn*, *Moses* or Gail Hightower's obsessive visualizing and hearing of hoofbeats propelling his "heroic" grandfather on horseback¹. When we turn to *Sanctuary* in a critic's animal-hunting capacity, we are likely to remember Mis Reba's yapping dogs, one of them mischievously named by Faulkner after a chairman of the censorship board of Memphis and Shelby Counties (Rouselle 44)²; or we might remember Tommy's telling Horace Benbow that Popeye shot Tommy's dog in cold blood. But other animals and animal imagery abound in *Sanctuary*. In my note I want to show Faulkner's characterization of Temple as a parrot. Twice in the novel Faulkner uses the word "parrot" to describe Temple's speech. At the trial, when questioned by the District Attorney, Temple "stared at him again, giving her parrotlike answers" (300). At the Grotto, the dance hall, Temple is "murmuring to him [Red] in parrotlike under-world epithet..." (252-53). Throughout *Sanctuary*, Temple repeats numerous short phrases as a parrot is apt to do. That others are aware of Temple's limited and repeated phrasings is obvious from the townboys' aping of her speech: "'My father's a judge,' the second said in a bitter, lilting falsetto" (31). "'My father's a judge,' the other said . . ." (31). Some of Temple's repeated phrases, always following closely after one another, include her calling Gowan Stevens a pig three times, two of those times adding the adjective "filthy" (38). Twice she blurts out at him the empty threat of "You'd better" (38). At the dance hall, Temple twice implores Popeye, to "Give it to me" and three times calls him "Daddy" (249), asking him to have sex with her crying out "please" (253) four times. Temple twice tells Red that she is "on fire" in her unsatisfied sexual frenzy (253). Just before the scene at the Grotto, Temple tells Popeye three times "I wont," and twice, "You're scared to!" while adding the slight, one-time variation of "You're scared of him [Red]!" (243). Temple taunts Popeye twice with, "He's [Red] a better man than you are" (243) and complains twice, "You hurt my mouth" (244,245). She also uses the phrase "Dont you wish" (245) three times in taunting Popeye with Red's sexual prowess Popeye never will possess. Finally, Temple calls out, "Oh, God; oh. God" (246), and tells Popeye four times, "I'll go back" (246-47).

Looking over the phrases just quoted, we see that they are hardly reflections of a deep thinker or excellent communicator; they are snatches of everyday speech bordering on or achieving cliché-status; just the kind of oft-repeated speech a parrot would imitate. Temple is a ready learner of such phrases, having, for example, picked up the notion that her father is a judge and an important man from a nanny perhaps; Temple may have learned the

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melodramatic sexual talk she uses on Popeye and Red from cheap gangster stories. That Temple is this kind of non-thinking phrase learner is evident when Ruby at the Old Frenchman place tells of her hardships and of being called a whore; Temple immediately whispers, "I've been called that" (61).

Not only does Temple parrot the everyday rhetoric floating in the air around her. Temple like a parrot is caged, metaphorically and literally, throughout *Sanctuary*. First, she is a judge's daughter, with an image to keep up. Likewise she is bound by school rules and maintaining a proper image there. She is a captive at the Old Frenchman place and Miss Reba's whorehouse, and becomes a witness at the trial so that society can have its justice performed; finally, she is captive in the custody of her father: At the Luxembourg Gardens, "Beside her her father sat, his hands crossed on the head of his *stick* [emphasis mine], the *rigid bar* [emphasis mine] of his moustache beaded with moisture like frosted silver" (333). The stick and rigid bar make us think of an animal trainer's tool and cage. Temple at the whorehouse is also kept in a sort of cage, her room, where like an exotic and moody bird she performs an occasional trick in exchange for food and liquor served by Minnie, and gifts (treats) brought to her by Popeye. The description of Temple's room, when she has been examined by a doctor upon her arrival, is very much reminiscent of a darkened/blanketed bird cage, in which the bird is to calm down and rest but inevitably will have some inklings of outside goings-on: "In the window the cracked shade, yawning now and then with a faint rasp against the frame, let twilight into the room in fainting surges" (157). Temple is "lying in the room's musty isolation" (166). "Now and then she heard automobile brakes... once two voices quarrelling bitterly came up and beneath the shade" (166). The china figures of the clock, the only decoration Faulkner describes in Temple's glance across the room, are like a caged bird's toy. Temple is also a caged bird at the Old Frenchman place. Housed in a crib/cage, "Sitting in the cottonseed-hulls, in the litter of gnawed corn-cobs. Temple lifted her head suddenly toward the trap at the top of the ladder" (106). The cottonseed-hulls and gnawed corn-cobs here suggest the litter of a bird-cage; the trap and ladder are suggestive of a bird cage ladder and door.

Temple not only speaks like a parrot and is housed like one; through-out *Sanctuary* she is very much concerned about her appearance, making one fine and exotic bird or fashion-hound, to employ a mixed but telling metaphor. At the trial, her bright and gaudy dress establishes her as an exotic and wild creature, especially when we compare her to the conservative demeanor of the town's citizens. In shock, like a recently captured bird (she has just gone from one climate-atmosphere to another, from whorehouse to courtroom, the latter a place where morals will triumph). Temple has to be asked twice by the District Attorney what her name is. This state of shock brought about by a new climate-atmosphere we observe also when at the Old Frenchman place Ruby startles Temple in the dark, who like a hysterical parrot cries out, "I'll tell my father! . . . I'll tell my father!" (86), thrashing from side to side. The final visio

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of Temple as a parrot in shock, having to endure yet another climate-atmosphere change, occurs at the Luxembourg Gardens, when sitting next to her father. Temple looks into the mirror and sees "a face in miniature sullen and discontented and sad" (333). Faulkner thus leaves us with a fitting image of Temple as a human parrot that has never been allowed to be *completely and purely wild* without any restraints imposed by a society of repressed human beings whose rules of conduct reflect just how unfit mankind is for civilized life; a society in which those upholding the zoo's lawful rules are just as extreme and dangerous as those engaging in the more "wicked," subversive sexual aberrations.

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Notes

¹For a brief overview of Faulkner's use of the bear, cow, horse, mule, and dog in his fiction, see Mary Alien's "Animal Crazy: William Faulkner/'

²See, for example, William Rosky's argument that "the experiences of both Temple and Horace reflect to a degree the symbolic pattern established by Miss Reba's poodles" (76). Furthermore, "they express, in their impotent fear before threatened annihilation by their ostensibly secure but now erratic universe, the essence of the human nightmare" (76).