



## From *Billy* to *I Cant' Wait on God*: Building the Case for Victimization *v.* Self-Affirmation

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# EPI-REVEL

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## **From *Billy* to *I Can't Wait on God*: Building the Case for Victimization v. Self-Affirmation**

**Jacqueline Berben-Masi\***

Albert French is the author of three tragic novels and a Vietnam War memoir, all premised upon a Samuel P. Huntington cultural fault line along which questions of guilt and innocence, responsibility and victimization, mores and laws, submission and self-affirmation receive sensitive, identity-based treatment. His first novel, *Billy*, illuminates a dark side of the American legal system, one set up by whites to keep blacks in their place, eternally subservient, exploitable, virtual slaves despite their "free" status.<sup>1</sup> That French's creative writing is solidly anchored in reality is proven by the carefully documented laws and cases cited by Randall Kennedy in *Race, Crime, and the Law*<sup>2</sup> and the norms and mores illustrated by David K. Shipler in *A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America*.<sup>3</sup> This paper will be a study in law and literature, one that scrutinizes how U.S. law, norms, and mores provide material for artistic creation.

In briefly presenting Albert French's three novels, we concentrate on common textual points and the author's professional evolution, while grounding these works in the Supreme Court decisions which legally ended the unconstitutional situations illustrated. Setting aside regional similarities among the geographic settings for these stories, we examine the stylistic devices that expose the yawning chasm between the two different communities and cultures, the black and the white, starting with the rhetorical figures and imagery. From there on, *Billy* becomes our centerpiece as we turn to questions of due process v. the rule of law, or "keeping the peace." Albert French, with a professional background in journalistic photography, as we shall see, neither neglects the role of the media nor overplays his hand. We then look at the climax of the novel, Billy's trial and the two pleadings, one humane and logical, the other

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1 New York: Penguin, 1993.

2 New York: Pantheon Books, 1997.

3 New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

vengeful and emotional. Once judgment is passed, "Life on Death Row" for Billy and his co-detainees becomes a *dénouement*. In fine, we apprehend this first novel as a plea for a re-examination of the death penalty and its unequal application, especially for minorities.<sup>4</sup>

Published in 1993 but set in 1937–38 Mississippi, *Billy*<sup>5</sup> exposes the unbearable horror of a 10-year-old child's execution for first-degree murder. Incredible as this plot may seem, melodramatic, nightmarish, French does not take radical liberties with verisimilitude, as indicated above. First, it took a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1988 (*Thompson v. Oklahoma*), to forbid equating juveniles under age 16 with adults, thereby in part outlawing the death penalty for these youthful offenders. Mississippi had no age minimum prior to the Thompson case.<sup>6</sup> Second, although the last execution of a juvenile in the twentieth century was of a South Carolina 14-year-old, George Junius Stinney, the ruling has not stopped the practice of giving adult treatment to adolescents.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, according to Amnesty International,<sup>8</sup> several states continue to enforce laws that allow prosecutors to charge adolescents under 16 with first-degree murder and try them as adults, even though they may not possess adult reasoning. We cite the example of the March 2001 Florida court

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4 Proponents and opponents of capital punishment under the Anglo-American legal system both justify their positions with reference to a transcendental link with a hereafter, the believers and the nonbelievers. The death penalty serves as a purification before transition to another level of existence for those who accept Christian religious teachings: evil exists; therefore it must be punished, commensurately to the transgression committed. Transcendence or no, for others, this possibility of an ultimate sanction is linked to the notion of the absolute character of political freedom and human rights in a democracy, as Albert Valdman points out in his March 31–April 1 *Figaro* review of former French minister of justice, Robert Badinter's book, *L'Abolition* (Paris: Feryane-Livres, "Témoignage", 2000). Badinter, directly concerned with the moratorium on capital punishment and its exclusion in France, supports the European social-democratic abolitionist view. While Albert French does not go into such institutional technicalities, his treatment of the role of religious leaders in the context of the death penalty creates an unresolved tension that culminates in an open-ended argument, one that draws the reader into a reexamination of his or her own opinion, as we shall see in the concluding paragraphs here below.

5 New York: Penguin Books.

6 In Justice Stevens' plurality opinion in the case, he notes all the states that have no minimum, including Mississippi (487 U.S. 815, 827–828, n. 26). He cites MS statutes dealing with the death penalty: Miss. Code Ann (sections 97-3-21, 97-7-67, 99-19-101, and 99-19-107). Today, MS considers the age of a defendant at the time of the crime as a mitigating circumstance under Section 99-19-101.

7 A.I.U.S.A., "On the Wrong Side of History: Children and the Death Penalty in the U.S.A. Back to the Future" (<<http://www.Amnestyusa.org/rightsforall/juvenile/dp/section4.html>>, 03/02/01), p. 1.

8 *Idem*.

decision involving 12-year-old Lionel Tate, which resulted in a life-sentence because the youth was ineligible for the death penalty.<sup>9</sup> The 1940s slogan, "old enough to kill, old enough to die" is paralleled by the California campaign supporting harsher penalties for youthful offenders: "do an adult crime, do adult time."<sup>10</sup> Scholars, most notably Victor L. Streib in his work on the juvenile death penalty in America today,<sup>11</sup> back up the A.I.U.S.A. claims. Last, as Frederick Douglass, who had escaped from his slave masters exactly 100 years before Billy Lee's story, duly noted: "[...] we have for any act of lawless violence the same excuse — an outrage by a Negro upon some white woman. It is a notable fact, also, that it is not with them the immorality or the enormity of the crime itself that arouses popular wrath, but the emphasis is put upon the race and color of the parties to it."<sup>12</sup>

French's second novel, *Holly*, published in 1995 but set in World War II North Carolina, deals with the love story between a working-class white woman and a war-mutilated black soldier, culminating in his lynching-suicide.<sup>13</sup> This plot draws its authenticity from written statutes prohibiting mixed-blood marriages, as well as the abovementioned unwritten codes of white moral domination. In regard to the former, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down all laws against miscegenation in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967; as for the latter, interracial couples continue to face public intolerance in many areas, even if recent surveys indicate growing tolerance, if not total acceptance. Here, the protagonists fall in love despite their awareness of the danger; they are "innocent" in the sense that their commitment to one another is sincere. Their downfall is punishment for self-affirmation, for daring to defy the social codes. Legally responsible adults, albeit just barely, each becomes a victim of public intolerance as tailored to the race of the offender.

More subtly than in *Billy*, French's third novel, *I Can't Wait on God*, published in 1998 but set in the summer of 1950, again deals with violent death, this time apparently premeditated, clearly abetted, and definitely motivated by theft.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Billy Lee, who from the outset is

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9 *Time* magazine, International edition (March 19, 2001), p. 38.

10 A.I.U.S.A.

11 See Streib's report, "The Juvenile Death Penalty Today: Death Sentences and Executions for Juvenile Crimes, January 1, 1973–June 30, 2000," <<http://www.law.onu.edu/faculty/streib/juvdeath.htm>>, as well as his earlier publication, *Death Penalty for Juveniles* (Indiana University Press, 1987).

12 Quoted in John Edgar Wideman, *The Lynchers* (New York: Harcourt/ Brace/ Jovanovich, 1973), p. 14.

13 New York: Penguin Books.

14 New York: Anchor Books/ Random House.

clearly a child defending himself from an overpowering aggressor, Willet Mercer, the woman who commits homicide, at first seems a marginal figure of questionable mores. The crime begins with a "sting" she and her boyfriend have conceived. Yet, gradually, Willet is revealed to be the severely traumatized victim both of a former employer, turned rapist, and of an unfair moral judgment by her family and hometown black community. Her killing the man who expected sexual service from her was her self-affirmation as a "woman warrior"; the reader cannot but conclude that the castration-homicide is revenge for the sufferings of her tender years. The novel ends as the police close in on their prey. With extradition to Pennsylvania, a capital punishment state, the unwritten outcome is a foregone conclusion. Again, adult responsibility and self-knowledge retain a degree of innocence betrayed and the line between victim and aggressor becomes blurred.

In all three novels, the protagonists are hunted down in the name of law and order by white sheriffs for whom police brutality against all transgressors, black or white, is considered justifiable use of force in the interest of maintaining the peace. Those arrested have little protection. Once more, a slew of subsequent Supreme Court decisions such as *Miranda v. Arizona* in 1966 upholding the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution against an obligation of self-incrimination, a position reaffirmed by the Court in the summer of 2000, should have spelt an end to objectionable practices. True, French portrays life in a society which preexisted these decisions, yet between the lines, there is a pessimistic intimation that, rather than rigid conformity to the rulings, exceptions for race are common. The past lives on in the present, as Albert's cousin, John Wideman, has so often asserted in his own opus, albeit with more universal reference.

Also like John Wideman, Albert French has a fine ear and is a master of voice and dialect, switching codes between black and white country speech patterns in the characters' scripts. As for a slightly accented narrator's discourse, he creates a *lingua franca* to set the leitmotif for a scene and its milieu, black or white, the Patch or Banes in *Billy*. The language, talk, names, manner of dress, occupations, dogs, dwellings, and behavior exhibited whenever black characters venture into white territory or vice-versa are equally effective in letting the reader determine where the action is taking place. Strict separation and adaptation of the attributes of the two civilizations distinguish Reverend Sims, the black preacher with his two Bibles, one a talisman *slavin'* Bible,<sup>15</sup> from single-Bible toting Brother Elson Pittman, his white

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15 How can we not recognize the dual nature of African-American experience exposed by W. E. B. Du Bois?

counterpart. Leroy's shack of a bar out in the brambles where black folk congregate is a far cry from the Saturday-night places on Dillion Street in town where white folks get drunk and disorderly. The owner of Jack's gets the sheriff in; Leroy keeps a pistol under the counter of his bar, "right next to his head-knockin stick" (p. 46). As we see in *Holly*, when someone gets killed in the black community, the body disappears and only the bereaved mourn his loss while the perpetrator of the deed rides the rails out of town. Otherwise, law and order proceeds from the church, which serves as the black community's courthouse, too. Although there are no secrets in Patch, individuals seem to enjoy greater tolerance from their peers. Patch and Banes approach deviance in conformity with community custom in culture-specific ways, provided no racial crossing-over destroys the equilibrium.

One exception to this duality is the organizing metaphor that underpins *Billy*. Earth, wind, fire, and water, apocalyptic imagery, hold key roles in this drama. For this is an apocalyptic tale, bearing the seeds of utter destruction for its protagonist and forecasting a dire future for the world he inhabits. Earth and water, like the clay from which God crafted Adam, the mud of the pond which is the crime scene is an actant: it traps Billy Lee and Gumpy, precipitating the fatal altercation. The mud of the swamp where Cinder tries to escape with her son betrays her; the red mud of the dirt road leading into and out of Patch where pathetic lives are played out prophesizes a violent finale. No one is immune to the personal and communal tragedies these elements seem to breed. "Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return," there seems to be no escaping this finality. The whole of mankind is condemned to a death sentence, but for some, its application is no natural outcome, doubling the ominous undertone. As for wind and fire, their appearance is to come shortly.

Like a palliative to these destructive forces, lyric descriptions of outdoor settings in the heart of nature couched first in standard English that gradually slides into black English serve as transition between white country town and black shantytown, opposite poles on an uneasy continuum. Both are "off limits" for members of the other race, and only trouble can ensue when anyone from either of the two communities trespasses. Then, tranquility yields to chaos. Echoes of Jean Toomer's *Cane* resound in the shapes, colors, and moods of the poetic, but ominous, descriptions that French pens:

The Patch night has its colors too, deep colors that seem to drift into one another, dark blues seeping into purples, misty grays floating while stars' yellows sparkle. Them tall trees along the far road stand dark gray above the black thick bushes beneath them. The road is dark until the bouncing lights come like cat eyes out of the night. (p. 86)

Similar hues tint the narrator's language a shade closer to that of his white or black characters, depending on the perspective for a particular scene, which locale and characters he is focalizing upon. At times, his rhythms and repetitions, whether alliteration, assonance or rhyme, accentuate the unfolding events by providing theme music, accelerating the chase scene when the sheriff and his hand-picked posse, including Cinder's natural "white" father, close in on Cinder and Billy:

Cinder is up now and dragging Billy into the bushes, her eyes like  
 a cat's, piercing into the shadow forms before her.  
 Thick bushes move, but swing back at her.  
 Billy moans, yanks at her arm to slow.  
 Cold soggy logs trip up her feet, she stumbles.  
 Big bulging trees loom like creatures in the night.  
 Bush thorns bite.  
 Coon dogs howl.  
 Mud squishes around her feet.  
 Bushes are thinning.  
 Tall grass sways in the starlight.  
 Coon dogs howl  
 Billy shouts, "Mama, Mama."  
 She stumbles and falls, rolls, and twist in the mud. (p. 99)

Sliding effortlessly from prose into poetry and back to prose, the text in its style, music, and referential codes, like its model, *Cane*, conjures up an album of images of the American south, imbued with its "homely" attraction and latent danger for the Black American. Irresistibly appealing, life-threatening, the setting and scenario strike a familiar chord, and the melody plays on. Blues, jazz, funeral dirge vibrate in the word riffs around the eternal theme of a race-conscious society where the roles of victim and aggressor are interchangeable, depending on the perspective adopted. When viewed from a black vantage point, the only part to be played is that of the victim of society, predestined for a shortened existence.

Yet not all white figures play Malcolm X's "White Devil," even if such seem unable to allay the passions of the masses. Aside from the titular protagonist in *Billy*, one character rivets our attention: everyone respects or fears Sheriff Tom as one mean man. Disobedience can cost you your life or your manhood. Unquestionably, of all the legal personnel in the novel, judge, prosecutor, public defender, deputy, prison guards and warden, the sheriff stands out as the most astute, complex, and cognizant. He is the key piece on the game board, the one that can make any move. Just as he can be touched by the grief of Lori Pasko's parents, he is sensitive to the tender age of the fugitive Billy Lee. On the one hand, he can gain the confidence of Lori's shocked cousin, Jenny, a participant and eye-witness, to entrust him with the details of the mortal encounter; on the other hand, he can outsmart the would-be lynchers and prevent another 1921 Tulsa-style massacre and burning. Moreover, he

can outmaneuver and outrun the desperate mother Cinder, fleeing and hiding with her child in the woods. Finally, he can set the cogs of the legal machine in motion just as he can deny individual justice for the sake of general order. He can coax, intimidate, commit mayhem, control the crowd, and privilege duty over personal needs, yet acquiesce to compassion. He is proud of his role and demands his exclusive right to exercise authority. Thus, the leader of the white vigilantes, Frank Ottum, receives the same threat as black barman Leroy for contempt of the sheriff's orders:

Ah told ya to keep ya ass out my business [...]. Ya fuckin up my investigation. Um the law and ya in my law [...]. Ah promise ya, if y ain't outta my law, outta my way, if ya ain't outta my sight, Um not gonna kill ya [...]. Um just goin ta blow your god-damn balls off, and every time ya try ta fuck ya can remember how you got in Sheriff Tom's law. (p. 93)

Even when the established order is unfair, Sheriff Tom will uphold it as an inherent component of his office and his white man's supremacy. Billy Lee's act has violated both and jeopardized the status quo; therefore, whatever his age, whatever the mitigating circumstances of his offence, he must die. Thus, the sheriff's self-affirmation as a white man and an enforcer of law and order necessarily requires the victimization of the other, of the transgressor.

Depth of character is revealed through the sheriff's perspicacity in regard to the complexities of the situation: "a little girl layin out there dead that shouldn't be" (p. 73) and his vow "We'll get the nigger" (p. 73). These statements stand out in contrast to his pained admission to his deputy minutes later that "The boy ain't but ten years old, Cecil" (p. 74). But Leroy's customers know "that ain't too young for them ta takes a nigger, theys takes a nigger any size" (p. 85). Again, for the black population, self-affirmation can only lead to becoming the victim of the white majority. Perhaps it is thanks to an accurate reading of his jurisdiction and times that Sheriff Tom has evolved his unique view of due process, selectively adhering to the requirements thereof in conformity with the expectations of the former. For example, he sees that his two young prisoners are fed the same food he eats. Moved by compassion, he puts the two into the same cell and provides them with a game of checkers. He effectively shields Billy and his friend and "accomplice-after-the-fact," Gumpy, both from the press and any lynch mob that might be forming. Along the way to presenting the boys for their hearing before the judge, he shields them from the angry crowd of town folks who taunt, spit upon, and assault the youngsters during their transferal from jail to courthouse. On the day of his trial, Billy is taken to the courthouse before dawn to avoid such trauma. When the time comes, the sheriff takes precautions to spirit the boys out of town in the dead of



night, whether to reform camp for Gumpy or to state prison for Billy. As the boy's execution date draws near, Sheriff Tom declines the much sought-after right to be a spectator. He is no one-dimensional caricature typical of the popular cultural image of a white southern sheriff fixed by Bull O'Connor *et alia* in the events of the 1960s' black freedom movement.

Nevertheless, his practices in securing information from potential black informants do not adhere to all the rules. Although a competent and sympathetic court-appointed lawyer is selected for Billy's trial, the sheriff interrogates both boys outside the presence of legal counsel. Billy's mother is denied access to her child. Worse, the presumption of innocence, the basic principle of the entire Anglo-American legal system, is flagrantly denied, by the reigning system of justice embodied by Sheriff Tom, and again through the media, whether formative of public opinion or merely a mirror thereof. Hence, the local newspaper stories whose sensational headlines run the gamut from "Killer on the Loose" to "Killer Captured" to "Boy Killer Comes to Trial" and, ultimately, "Killer Boy to Die," indelibly brand the child in the public imagination, as if the racist context were insufficient. Another painful truth for a democracy that prides itself on equality, social psychologists have recognized that white sexual arousal can be stimulated by the prospect of a black man's Calvary; although unstated, this precept is implicit in the courting-seduction scenes between the newspaper editor and his assistant, for whom the case is a unique personal opportunity, for the former to sell more copies of his paper and enhance his reputation, for the latter to win herself a husband that matches her own ambitions without having to leave for the big city. Together, these two set on its head the time-hallowed American journalist's code of "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." Thus does French point to the materialistic and manipulative role the media often plays in reporting crime stories, especially if the cast of characters matches the stereotypes of black beast savaging white innocence. For when the colors and roles are inverted, even today, a double standard prevails in many areas of the U.S.A.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Just one example is the "accidental" death of a young African-American, Kashef White, struck down and killed by a pickup truck driven by two Clemson University students, the scions of a prominent, local white dynasty, on May 12, 2001. Witnesses saw police cover up evidence of DUI, supplying alcohol to an underage consumer, and excessive speed. No charges were filed. See James Shannon's article in the Greenville, South Carolina press of June 30, 2001. How many more of these affairs are hushed up? True, we are far from the days of the Ku Klux Klan and its ritual lynchings. Gradually the balance is shifting. Nonetheless, racial identification is influential in determining the reading of controversial events, from the O. J. Simpson trials to the current retrial of New York policemen accused of assaulting black Haitian immigrant Abner Louima, endangering his life. Credibility

It is clear in the trial section of the novel that the adversarial contest about to begin will not be one between equals, but an accusatorial process. "Folks from afar who had heard the news had traveled in the night. Banes folks who lived around the corner began making their way [...]. Courtroom A was ready, and its bench seats were filling up." In contrast, only a few Patch residents accompany Cinder; she, Reverend Sims, Aunt Katey, and Big Jake press together "In the far rear of the courtroom, where coloreds can sit," so far away that Cinder "cannot see her child" nor "see into the eyes" of the jurors because "the faces were too far away" (p. 166). Fear of white retaliation has kept the rest of Patch folks away. Albeit a democracy, in this biased courtroom, the power of the many over the few rarely allows for a David v. Goliath underdog victory. Whites have come to watch a black transgressor sent to his death. Blacks, as in their own church courthouse, are here to pray for mercy.

Not surprisingly, the prosecutor, Ely Hampton, has political ambitions and uses his opening statement to the court like a campaign platform, impressing upon the people that he is the one who represents them, and that together, he and they seek justice for the victim. The style of his delivery reflects the content of his discourse. Its verbs turn the clock back to slaving times: "Then his words began to whip and snap at the air: 'A knife in the hand of that vicious Nigra boy slashed the life away from Lori. She was just fifteen'" (p. 167). Neither the biased characterization of Billy nor Lori's physical advantage over him and initial attack against him enter into the formula. Here appears the primary element of air, a "wild wind," "a storm of sounds," which serves as metonymy for the prosecution's case. Before this tempest, the simple truth of Wilbur Braxton's defense scatters like straw: "Billy Lee Turner is just ten years old, just a child. A frightened child. What happened at that pond was a tragedy. A tragedy. Not a vicious crime." In the silence this rebuttal meets, another basic element symbolizes the impact Braxton's words have on the packed courthouse and all-male jury, clones of Lori's father: "Red Pasko's eyes burned red with fire," precisely the end awaiting Billy Lee in the electric chair (p. 167). Cousin Jenny Curran's classmates will later chant the mood of their elders: "Lori's killer goin to die, I'll be glad when he fries" (p. 201).

A mere parenthesis during a break in the proceedings, Ginger Pasko's silent plea to the sheriff to allow Cinder to see her child opens a breach in the wall of racial solidarity thanks to maternal empathy. One

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of the witnesses to be in direct relation to the skin color of the juror and public spectator, according to the *New York Times* of September 20, 2002. Self-affirmation in these instances resembles supporting one's home team. Convictions and acquittals correspond to racial identification with the accused or the victim. Progress has been made; more remains to be realized.

mother's heart can read another's, can identify with her pain. Once the locked door is opened, the exchanges between mother and child reveal how naïve Billy Lee is, how uncomprehending he is of the process he is caught up in, how "innocent" he remains. These traits are those the defense tries to exhibit by putting Billy Lee on the stand.

In exchange for rare moments of humane comfort, the child defendant is irremediably condemned by the testimony not only of Jenny, an eye witness and a participant in the fatal event, but of Gumpy, turned state's witness and partly giving hearsay evidence: "He showed me his knife, its have blood on it. He say he stuck her in the titty. He say that too" (p. 169). The violent pattern in Billy's behavior, in conformity with the negative reputation surrounding his aloof mother and putative father, is fixed when Gumpy tells where Billy kept his knife: "It's be in his pocket. Cept if he wants ta cuts sumpin. If he gits mad at ya, he chase ya wit it. But he can't catch me. He can't runs like me." A classic possession of boyhood, the game aspect, the playmate rivalry, the cultural clash between an aggressive, dominant society oblivious to its own nature and an underling's need to be armed against its abuses, if appreciated by the reader, have no impact on the judge and jury. For the latter, white and black alike have confirmed Billy's incorrigibly antisocial essence.

Again, the prosecutor shouts his questions, leads the witness, attributes both *doli capax*, the capacity to commit crime, and *mens rea*, criminal intent, to the cowering child whose timid justification, "she beats me up" is trumped by Ely Hampton's producing Lori's blood-stained shirt. That she was the aggressor, Billy the victim, and their roles only reversed by a self-defensive maneuver that became an unintentionally mortal blow, the truth, pales before the gory exhibit. Wilbur Braxton's homespun eloquence and sympathy for Lori's family, his humble, soft-spoken manner, and simple plea, "please don't kill Billy too" are again met with silence (p. 173). Silence like Cinder's or Billy's whenever any questions are asked. Silence as a refusal to be compromised. Silence because, like Melville's Billy Budd or Camus' Meursault, Billy Lee Turner is handicapped by his inability to play the legalistic narrative game.<sup>17</sup> Another silence follows the prayers of Reverend Sims, who exhorts Cinder even though his own faith has waned: "God cans show blind mens to see. He'll show em the rights things ta do. Ya just gots ta believes" (p. 173). But thunder wins out over whispers, wind over stillness, thus completing the apocalyptic quadrangle that pits the ancient Greeks' basic components of life against that of one little black boy.

17 See Chapter 7 of Richard H. Weisberg's, *The Failure of the Word, The Protagonist as Lawyer in Modern Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 115-129.

Billy's conviction and presence on death row are certainly travesties of justice. The chains, jail uniforms, and electric chair do not fit the child, symbolizing how unfit he is for adult punishment. Crass remarks greet his appearance: "Boss man Welte, what's ya got over there? Who that? They gonna burn that boy? Who that?" or "Hey, Sack Man, we git us some new meat? Whatcha got up there? Meat wagon come in? What we git?" (p. 178). The bravado cries in the dark suggest frighteningly evil creatures lurking about. Indeed, the jeers come from men, not boys. At first glance, they seem tough, cruel and inhuman; perhaps even in their rightful place. Yet, closer analysis sets Billy apart from them primarily by his age. The roll call of his new fellows and their crimes sounds a familiar chord: all black, all poor, all social misfits awaiting extermination, from the mentally retarded to the criminally insane, from an amputated war vet who killed in self-defense to a spurned lover, convicted for "raping" his white mistress. There is no category among those incarcerated on the cell block that matches the template of the cognizant, hardened, unrepentant criminal beyond all hope for rehabilitation. None is so innocent as Billy. A few have adopted Christ's advice to become like little children through repentance and acceptance; most, Billy included, have opened their souls and expect God's forgiveness, again like Meurseult. None, however, merits the constant mental torture and physical deprivation of this antechamber to the final solution. A miniature sacrificial victim upon whom converge the injustices of the penal order, Billy Lee Turner's story invites the reader to reconsider the underlying philosophy of that system. At the novel's end, the narrator figuratively waves a rhetorical, bloodstained shirt before the gaze of a society that begrudges life to those who do not fit the desired mould, a society that crushes them beneath its weight just as Lori Pasko did to Billy, presses their faces into the mud, daring them to try and escape its vengeance. In the end, we are all victims and aggressors, passive readers and active participants. Albert French opens our eyes to the enormity of the real-life situation and leaves us pondering whether, when, where, and how, the scales of justice in America will ever balance out.

