In many of his works, William Faulkner explores the theme of morality as his characters navigate the post-Civil War era South. For the majority of Faulkner’s adult characters, their beliefs about morality are largely unchanging throughout the works in which they appear. Faulkner’s adolescent characters, however, often have transformative experiences in developing a sense of morality in societies where many of the traditions and expectations are racist, classist, or otherwise dehumanizing. In Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*, sixteen-year-old Chick Mallison must configure his moral compass when faced with the choice to save the life of Lucas Beauchamp, a black farmer accused of murdering a white man in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. As Chick comes to his own ethical conclusions and develops the intrinsic motivation to help Lucas, his development follows Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian Theory of Moral Development. Analyzing Chick’s experiences and behavior through this student development lens suggests that, by the end of the novel, Chick has grown into an ethically sound student capable of superior moral reasoning.

Because the title “student” carries with it a variety of definitions and connotations, Chick may not initially appear to fall within that category. While he is of school age, Chick’s learning in the novel takes place entirely outside of an academic environment. In fact, though Chick is enrolled in school, he actively misses classes in order to help prove Lucas’s innocence, despite
his parents’ preference that he go to school instead (Faulkner 126). In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “student” is defined as both “a person studying at a university or other place of higher education” and “a person engaged in or dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, especially in a particular subject area” (“Student, n.1.”). In both of these definitions, the concept of a “student” is limited to individuals who are, first, enrolled in school, and, second, pursuing the acquisition of knowledge in a way that is both intentional and institutional.

The way we define students, however, does not need to be so limited. In an article published in *About Campus* in 2000, Dr. Fred Newton explains that students are created as a result of societal instability, which creates a drive toward the “attainment of a perspective that seeks and finds consistency, clarity, connection, and congruence in their lives” (12). In this sense, a student is any person seeking to develop a consistent sense of understanding themselves, those around them, and the world in societies that pose significant challenges. Through this definition, we can very clearly classify Chick Mallison as a student in that he is actively developing a sense of how to morally navigate the world around him—despite not once setting foot in a classroom during the novel.

Student development theory has the practical application of being used by educational institutions to optimize student growth. Additionally, though, student development theory serves as a way of objectively describing and discussing student growth (Lineros and Hinojosa 1). Having established that Chick fits our definition of “student”, utilizing student development theory allows for us to assess how Chick’s understanding of morality progresses throughout *Intruder in the Dust*.

The most applicable theory to apply to Chick’s situation is Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian Theory of Moral Development. Rest’s theory followed the moral development theory of
Kohlberg, who theorized that, as students become more mature, they proceed through a series of subsequent moral stages (Rest, “Moral Development” 297). This stage theory emphasizes students’ development and progression through each stage in order. In Kohlberg’s theory, development—moral or otherwise—is conceptualized in terms of moving up a staircase. These steps occur one at a time, without skipping a step or reversing backwards (Rest, “Moral Development” 298). This theory presumes that all students progress forward in a strictly linear fashion. Conversely, Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian Theory proposes the idea of schemas, which are seen in terms of “shifting distribution” rather than as a series of stairs (Rest, “Moral Development” 298). This allows students to skip certain schemas, regress into earlier schemas and allows for a descriptive classification of students’ developmental progress rather than a prescriptive categorization.

Rest’s theory outlines three specific schemas that students enter while developing morality. These schemas are labeled the Personal Interest schema, the Maintaining Norms schema, and the Post-Conventional schema (Thoma 352). Each schema contains distinct elements and sources of motivation for students, which are indicative of their level of moral reasoning.

The first of Rest’s schemas is the Personal Interest Schema. Typically, this schema occurs before the age of twelve, and is described as “presocentric,” meaning the student often experiences this schema before they have a conceptualization of organized society (Rest, “Morality Research” 305). In this schema, students focus on the perceived gains and losses they experience individually within a moral dilemma. According to Dr. Stephen Thoma, this schema pertains most often to small interactions experienced by students, “linking close relationships and individual interest” (Thoma 353). In this schema, what is considered right and wrong to the
student is that which immediately affects them and those that are immediately around them—if the student steals from a friend, they know the damaging implications that action can have on the relationship with that friend. Similarly, choices made with the intention of having a positive result for the student personally, like giving a gift, are based on the outcome giving the gift will have for the student giving it, not receiving it. In giving a gift to a friend, the perception is that the friend will be happy and like the student more. All choices made in the Personal Interest schema relate back to a positive outcome for the student performing the action.

In a more complicated sense, evidence of Chick progressing through the Personal Interest Schema can be found in the flashback that begins the novel. Here, twelve-year-old Chick, Aleck Sander, and “one of Edmond’s tenant’s sons” (Faulkner 5) head into the woods to hunt. While crossing a creek, Chick falls through ice and into the water below (Faulkner 6). As Chick struggles to escape the water, Lucas Beauchamp appears and helps him out of it, then takes the boys to his home where he dries Chick’s clothes and feeds him a hot meal. After eating Lucas’s food—a meal that Chick notes is not just “the best Lucas had to offer but all he had to offer” (Faulkner 18) and warming up by the fire, Chick attempts to pay Lucas a handful of coins for his help. When Lucas does not accept the coins, Chick “watched his palm turn over not flinging the coins but spurning them downward ringing onto the bare floor” (Faulkner 15).

Chick attempting to pay Lucas for his services reflects his participation in the Personal Interest Schema. Because Lucas helped Chick—and, in fact, saved his life—Chick feels personally indebted to him. Chick attempts to reconcile this feeling of indebtedness by paying Lucas for his help. This perceived need to amend the debt is not driven by a moral obligation to repay Lucas out of gratitude, but is instead driven by a feeling of inferiority because of the debt. Chick cannot bear the idea of being in such a debt, and, when Lucas does not accept his initial
payment, seeks other ways to repay him—buying a dress for Molly, Lucas’s wife, for example. Lucas again subverts Chick’s plans by sending him a gallon of molasses in exchange for the dress, placing them “right back where they had started” (Faulkner 23).

The positive outcome Chick associates with repaying the debt to Lucas is in regaining his sense of superiority over Lucas. To be in the debt of a black man is not only alarming to Chick, but also humiliating to him as a white man in a racist society. This urge to be superior to Lucas drives Chick’s obsession with repaying him. Because these acts are based on the benefit Chick gains, his choices in this section of the novel reflect his participation in the Personal Interest schema. Lucas’s refusal to accept the payment sparks the beginning of Chick’s progression out of it.

The second of Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian principles is the Maintaining Norms schema. In this schema, the student’s understanding of morality is based on a society-wide moral perspective (Thoma 353). This understanding draws heavily on the student’s perception of rules, traditions, and the importance of authorities in society. The hierarchal relationship between the student and authority figures is very important in this schema. While these relationships tend to be between students and parents, students and teachers, and students and other authorities like police, these relationships can extend to other interactions as well. The most important element of the Maintaining Norms schema, however, is the prioritization of the established social order, and the understanding that the maintenance of that order is an essential moral obligation (Thoma 353).

Chick is surrounded by a society where people exhibit racist beliefs. In many cases, these beliefs are very clear and malicious. Racial slurs are spoken by many characters around Chick, and other forms of oppression also become apparent to Chick in the novel. Even characters who
are very close to Chick, like his Uncle Gavin, whom he trusts more than many other characters in the novel, express racist ideas. In a conversation in front of Chick, Uncle Gavin asks Lucas: “has it ever occurred to you that if you just said mister to white people and said it like you meant it, you might not be sitting here now?” (Faulkner 60). This statement, in addition to the common practices around him, illustrates for Chick that the oppression of black people is a social norm.

Chick, initially, perpetuates these norms and believes sincerely that Lucas is in the wrong for not conforming to the expectations of society. Chick thinks about these concepts for much of the beginning of the novel, stating a desire that Lucas act as black men are expected to act for “one second, one little infinitesimal second” (Faulkner 22).

Chick also perpetuates aspects of the racist culture he lives in when Lucas sends the gallon of molasses to him in exchange for Molly’s new dress. After Chick’s mother explains to him that Lucas didn’t bring the molasses himself, but instead had it brought there by a white boy on a mule, Chick is furious. He comments that, though they were “right back where they had started,” it was “even worse this time because this time Lucas had commanded a white hand to pick up his money and give it back to him” (Faulkner 23). While Chick’s reaction to the circumstances of the delivery of the molasses are related to him not wanting to be indebted to Lucas, Chick also has a strong aversion to being placed in a situation where he feels inferior to a black man. This is an indicator of the racist ideals of his culture, which, as part of the Maintaining Norms schema, he perpetuates by being upset when he the roles are subverted.

The final schema Rest proposes is the post-conventional schema. The post-conventional schema differs from the Maintaining Norms schema in that the latter gains a moral consensus by appealing to existing authority, while the Post-Conventional schema establishes moral consensus by appealing to ideals and ideological coherences (Rest, “Moral Research” 388). Because of the
amount of thought this schema requires, it is frequently believed that the Post-Conventional Schema is the most advanced of the schemas. In an article published in *The Journal of Adult Development*, Dr. Darcia Narvaez describes the Post-Conventional schema as “a breakthrough in cognitive development, marking one of the primary features of late adolescent development and has become one of the best indicators of college student development” (Narvaez 10). This stage, which is marked by what Thoma describes as “the position that moral obligations are to be based on criteria that prioritize shared ideals, are fully reciprocal, and are open to scrutiny” (Thoma 353), is the most advanced of Rest’s schemas. In the post-conventional schema, the student realizes that laws and rules are created social contracts that do not determine how individuals should act.

Chick has the most transformative experiences in developing his sense of morality in the Post-Conventional Schema. Chick first begins to question the actions of society while in this schema, and is skeptical of the actions of the people in town. In Walter Brylowski’s essay “The Theme of Maturation in *Intruder in the Dust,*** Brylowski writes that the “greatest reconciliation Chick must make is with the community as a whole” (175). This is to say that one of the difficulties Chick encounters is in recognizing that the actions of the group are wrong—this is especially apparent when the gathered mob learn that Lucas has been proven innocent, and the mob clears away. Chick notes most vividly in this section that “they ran” (Brylowski 175), which repulses Chick and makes him angry, because the mob did not try to absolve themselves of their own guilt. It is after this scene when Chick’s Uncle Gavin explains to him that:

> There is a simple numerical point at which a mob cancels and abolishes itself, maybe because it has finally got too big for darkness, the cave it was spawned in is no longer big enough to conceal it from light and so at last whether it will or not
it has to look at itself…or maybe it’s because man having passed into mob passes then into mass which abolishes mob by absorption, metabolism, then having got too large even for mass becomes man again conceivable of pity and justice and conscience even if only in the recollection of his long painful aspiration toward them, toward that something anyway of one serene universal light. (Faulkner 197)

In this quote, Uncle Gavin explains to Chick that what is the most popular decision—the decision of the mob—is not always the right decision, which the mob will realize once it becomes, again, “conceivable of pity and justice and conscience” (Faulkner 197).

This section of the novel, which Brylowski uses to discuss the theme of maturation in *Intruder in the Dust*, is one area where Chick shows evidence of progressing through the Post-Conventional Schema. In realizing that the mob is not always right—running away from Lucas before apologizing to him, even though they were clearly, as Chick knows, in the wrong—Chick demonstrates an understanding that what would be considered a social norm is wrong. By questioning the status quo, Chick illustrates that he is progressing form the Maintaining Norms schema to the Post-Conventional Schema.

Chick also exhibits other examples of progressing into the Post-Conventional Schema. When he decides to help to prove Lucas’s innocence, for example, he exhibits post-conventional thinking. In Charles Thomas Vernon’s book *Morality in William Faulkner’s Novels*, Vernon notes that Chick has a greater ethical flexibility than his Uncle Gavin (63). Vernon also describes Chick as being in a “formative state pliable enough to profit, though much accompanying pain, from the violation of his too easily acquired conventional ethics” (63). Through a Neo-Kohlbergian lens, this flexibility and change in ethics comes from Chick’s level of development between the Maintaining Norms and Post-Conventional Schemas.
One of the greatest examples of Chick thinking in a post-conventional sense is when he decides that he will help Lucas. Even Uncle Gavin, whom Chick trusts immensely, does not think that Lucas could be innocent given the substantial evidence against him in the beginning of the novel. Chick decides to help Lucas:

Because he had already passed that long ago when something—whatever it was—had help him here five minutes ago looking back across the vast, the almost unsuperable chasm between him and the old Negro murderer and saw, heard Lucas saying something to him not because he was himself, Charles Mallison junior, nor because he had eaten the plate of greens and warmed himself at the fire, but because he alone of all the white people Lucas would have a chance to speak to between now and the moment when he might be dragged out of the cell and down the steps at the end of a rope, would hear the mute unhoping urgency of the eyes. (Faulkner 67).

In this passage, Faulkner shows not only Chick’s realization that he is separate from society in his choice to prove Lucas’s innocence, but that he has a moral obligation beyond repaying Lucas for his help years before. In choosing to help save Lucas’s life, Chick demonstrates a post-conventional sense of thinking outside his own interests and toward the interest of others, regardless of what society suggests is actually correct.

By the end of the novel, Chick Mallison has developed a sense of morality that is selfless—choosing to forgo sleep and risking his own reputation and status to help Lucas. In this sense, Chick transcends the Personal Interest schema. Further, because he chooses to help Lucas despite the racist society that exists in Yoknapatawpha County, Chick exhibits moral reasoning beyond the Maintaining-Norms schema. By passing through these two schemas and exhibiting
traits that are both selfless and which allow for a critical analysis of society, Chick illustrates the moral reasoning of a post-conventional student. By obtaining this Post-Conventional status, Chick’s character demonstrates superior moral reasoning, especially when compared to the nameless mob found earlier in the novel.

By the end of the novel, having progressed through the three schemas, Chick demonstrates significant change. In the beginning of the novel, Chick was primarily concerned with how he could repay Lucas so as to quickly and quietly escape a sense of indebtedness he felt. This indebtedness humiliated him as a white man, and was an aspect of his life he obsessed about regularly—trying for a very long time to repay the perceived debt. The earlier section of the novel was also marked by a persistent sense of Chick perpetuating social norms by frequently insisting that Lucas “be a nigger first” (Faulkner 22). By the end of the novel, however, Chick’s experiences have transformed his perspective. Instead of perpetuating the societal idea that Lucas needed to “admit he’s a nigger,” Chick supports Lucas and helps gain him his freedom back (Faulkner 18).

At the end of the novel, Chick demonstrates this drastic change by recognizing the behavior of the mob as wrong, but by actively taking action against what the mob had planned to do by saving Lucas. By sacrificing his own time and well-being to help prove Lucas’s innocence, Chick demonstrates a selflessness and concern for another human being that transcends the racism of his town. This is a significant change from his perspective earlier in the novel, which perpetuated racist beliefs and viewed all interactions with Lucas as ways to repay him for this help.

Chick progresses through each of the three of Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian schemas by the end of the novel, showing strong growth in his moral reasoning, and a significant change in his
perspective on the world. By demonstrating the way Chick changes his town, his perspective, and the life of Lucas, Chick serves many purposes as a character in *Intruder in the Dust*. First, because Chick is able to discover the best moral choice by viewing the situation from a perspective of right and wrong, rather than a perspective based exclusively on race, Faulkner illustrates the ability of people in the South to escape the racist ideologies they were born into. Additionally, Chick’s ability to change suggests that change is possible even in the most seemingly clear of circumstances. Initially, the evidence mounted against Lucas is overwhelming—even Chick’s Uncle Gavin is convinced that there is no way, initially, to prove Lucas’s innocence. However, by including a character like Chick in his novel, Faulkner illustrates that individuals can change their way of thinking, and in turn, make their societies better—even if only by saving the life of one other person.
Works Cited


