Wisdom of the Crowd

The theme of conforming to social norms is evident in many of William Faulkner's short stories. Typically, he includes the role of a gatekeeper who ensures that others behave in socially acceptable ways. One can interpret a gatekeeper’s duty to be both negative and positive. Gatekeepers can strip an individual of their originality by forcing them to follow the crowd; however, gatekeepers can also help set a person on the correct path and allow them to discover themselves. In the short story “Uncle Willy,” Faulkner presents a complicated picture of gatekeeping to illustrate how society shapes people to conform to social norms by including Uncle Willy’s addiction and Mrs. Merridew’s efforts to reform him.

Throughout the story, Uncle Willy suffers from an addiction to dope, and while the children of the town seem to look up to him, the adults consider him a social outcast. He lives alone “in a little old neat white house where he had been born on the edge of town” (Faulkner 226). Being “born at the edge of town” foreshadows Willy’s future place in the community. Uncle Willy also owns a small drugstore and “never had any customers except country people buying patent cards and dice” (226). Uncle Willy’s reputation makes most of the townspeople avoid being associated with him, unlike people from out of town who know nothing of his poor societal status. The only people in the town who associate themselves with him are also outcasts:
his wife, a prostitute; children in the town who are not yet participating members of society; and black people living in the segregated South.

Uncle Willy's addiction serves as a gatekeeper because it controls his behavior and determines his place in the world. As Lee Siegel explains in his essay "Go the Same Way, or Go the Wrong Way,” gatekeepers use coercion to "extinguish your personality, spew contempt at your uniqueness, disable the operation of your individual instincts and judgment." The substances act as a form of coercion that strip Uncle Willy of his personality and control his judgment and instincts about others, forcing him to lose touch with himself. Uncle Willy tells the boys he had taken drugs since he was about twenty years old, meaning that he has never fully engaged as an adult in his town. By abusing drugs, Uncle Willy further reinforces his outcast status, and by continuing to do the drugs, he will remain there. He has lived four decades as an outcast, so when people try to force him into society, he does not understand how to function in the practical world. Since he does not feel a part of the polite society, he takes the society that does accept him. Many people think he is crazy because of his addiction and try and cure him, but his addiction helps him maintain his childlike status and lack of responsibility.

Most notably, Faulkner uses the character Mrs. Merridew as a gatekeeper. She takes charge of caring for Uncle Willy and helping him get past his crippling addiction. However, her aim is not only to cure Uncle Willy of his addiction, but to "give him a complete rebirth, not only into real Christianity but into the practical world too" (232). She firmly believes that teaching him to live in the practical world will give him respect among the men of the community. One can find her gatekeeping to be a gesture of kindness; however, with further examination, it is clear that her kind gestures are a way to pressure Uncle Willy to conform to social norms. For
instance, Mrs. Merridew forcefully states that she will prepare “a nice glass of cool lemonade” for Uncle Willy and then he will “have a nice chicken dinner” and “take a nice nap in my hammock” all activities that a typical man would partake in (229). She also embraces Uncle Willy in the name of Christianity because the majority of people in the community participate in the same belief. Because of her efforts on behalf of the church, Mrs. Merridew becomes well respected in the community, and many people see her as a role model. Mrs. Merridew becomes consumed in her gatekeeping role, perhaps helping Uncle Willy as a selfish act to further boost her respectability in the community and her own sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

Despite her possibly selfish intentions, Mrs. Merridew’s attempts at trying to help Uncle Willy can be perceived as being beneficial. She is trying to make him part of the community and acceptable to other people. He is potentially corrupting the youth in the town and does not partake in the responsibilities that adults should participate in. Mrs. Merridew feels that by curing him, he will be able to join the rest of the town and be a contributing member of society and not a burden to the community. Ironically, Mrs. Merridew’s efforts to control Uncle Willy push him to take control of his own life. Throughout the text, Uncle Willy is treated as a child and always told what to do. When Mrs. Merridew gives him the ultimatum, Uncle Willy takes matters into his own hands for once. Instead of just giving in, he sells his house and disappears. He uses the money to purchase a plane, which becomes his escape from all the “timid clinging to rule-ridden breathing” (239). Uncle Willy literally and figuratively flies away from the social pressures of society and follows his own individual path where he does not feel manipulated by social pressures. He decides his life will not end in an asylum, but instead in his own unique way.
Faulkner’s “Uncle Willy” affirms Siegel's analysis of how gatekeeping maintains social order, although in a highly complex and unexpected way. The gatekeepers in the story are both animate, Mrs. Merridew, and inanimate, Uncle Willy’s addiction. Furthermore, when Mrs. Merridew acts as the ultimate gatekeeper and threatens Uncle Willy with being committed to an asylum, he is inspired to take control of his life and leave the world his own way rather than submit to societal norms. Despite Siegel’s assertion that humans have an obvious tendency to follow the “wisdom of crowds” to feel accepted, it is not borne out in the story. In the end, Uncle Willy would rather die in his own way than conform to the person that the crowd believes he should be.
Works Cited
