The Unvanquished Short Guide

The Unvanquished by William Faulkner

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Contents

Characters

As with most of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha characters, readers can find these characters' origins in Sartoris (1929), later published posthumously as Flags in the Dust. More even than The Sound and the Fury (1929), Sartoris is a break-through book for Faulkner, since, in his imagination, he discovers a mythic place and group of characters that engaged his whole life. Faulkner had a habit of reusing characters and reworking them. All of the stories in The Unvanquished were previously published as short stories except "An Odor of Verbena"— five in The Saturday Evening Post, a popular magazine, and "Skirmish at Sartoris" in the more literary Scribner's Magazine. As is typical of Faulkner, he deepened the works, particularly the first two stories in The Saturday Evening Post. Instead of a series of works that might well have been a series of comic adventures for Ringo and Bayard with a Civil War backdrop, the characters in the novel are used to examine the effects of war, privation, and social change in the South from 1863 through Reconstruction.

Aside from place, what holds the stories together is the growth of Bayard, from a twelve-year-old boyhood to a twenty-four-year-old manhood. The changes in Bayard are caused by the war and its aftermath, but mainly they are caused by changes in the relation of Bayard to his father. Bayard and Ringo, in the first two stories, see John Sartoris as if he were a knight, someone larger than life. They are always amazed when John gets off his horse, and they see that he is physically short, a slight man like Faulkner.

Southern defeats seem impossible to the boys when the South has such officers as John Sartoris. In the course of the action, Bayard and Ringo are separated from John Sartoris almost to the end of the war, so that both boys are under the control and protection of Granny, Rosa Millard. During this gap in time Ringo grows even more than Bayard, when Granny must find some way to help her family and its black servants when men are gone and the home is burned and looted. Ringo, loyal and smart, takes charge, while Bayard unaccountably seems to watch rather than act as both swindle the Union army in order to survive and help their community survive.

Granny's murder at the hands of the Southern renegade, Grumby, thrusts the action back into Bayard's hands, as he leads Ringo and Buck McCaslin in revenge. Just as Granny must swindle to help her family and her neighbors because of the privations of war, so must Bayard pursue revenge, since there is no other law in the South, no social structure to which an appeal could be made. When the seventy-year-old Buck is wounded and must separate from the boys, they are left to pursue revenge. Not only does Bayard shoot the fleeing Grumby in the back, but he and Ringo cut off Grumby's hand, peg his body on the door of the place in which Granny was killed, and tie his hand to her grave marker. The atmosphere in the story is nightmarish, with its days and nights run together, and sleep and wakefulness fused, but the act remains brutal.

Again, for several years after the murder of Grumby, Bayard is more watcher than actor, and what he observes, largely the doings of his father and Drusilla, seems to lead to the

renunciation of violence in the last story. Drusilla and John literally forget to get married, as they are first engrossed in rebuilding John's house and then in preventing the election of a black marshal. While their actions have interest in and of themselves, Faulkner never lets one forget that Bayard is watching them. Bayard sees his father shooting people too quickly, bullying them. As one of John's officers, George Wyatt, observes about him, "he's had to kill too many folks, and that's bad for a man." John himself is aware of the problem, when before he meets Redmond and is killed, he tells Bayard that he needs "a little moral housecleaning. I am tired of killing men, no matter what the necessity nor the end."

While John Sartoris is aware of his own corruption, Drusilla, through the privations of the war and her own career as a soldier, is unaware of what has happened to her. She lost the man to whom she was engaged to the war, and her marriage to John Sartoris, when she is closer in age to his son, is forced upon her. Drusilla idolizes John, but this idolatry has little to do with love. He no doubt feels affection for her, probably gratitude, but not love.

John's ambivalence may have something to do with Drusilla's seductive kisses to Bayard. Since she cannot get all that she wants from John Sartoris, then perhaps the softer, younger son would fill the gap in love she feels in her life. Marriage and a family seem unreal to Drusilla, as the war has made her into a priestess of violence and revenge supposedly bringing about justice. When she hands Bayard his father's pistols after John's death, she calls the barrels "true as justice, the triggers (you have fired them) quick as retribution, the two of them slender and invincible and fatal as the physical shape of love." Faulkner introduces a new character in "An Odor of Verbena," Aunt Jenny, the younger sister of Bayard's father but close in age to Drusilla. Despite the war having made her a young widow, Jenny is domestic, sane in her care and love of her family, and an antidote to Drusilla. Her wish to preserve Bayard's life exceeds the claims of honor; she is an ally who alone can understand Bayard's wish not to continue the cycle of revenge by killing Redmond. Out of his study of law, and out of the earnestness of his reading of Christ's life, and in view of the corruptions of Drusilla and John, Bayard renounces killing, refusing to go armed to his encounter with Redmond, and thereby transforms the heroic code that he admired.

Several black characters are of interest in The Unvanquished, the most important of whom are Loosh and Ringo. Loosh in the early stories is seen leaving the plantation at night, pursuing news of northern victories, and seeking a promised freedom. He and his wife leave the Sartoris family at the end of the second story, but in "An Odor of Verbena" they have returned. Bayard compares Loosh's behavior to Ringo's when Ringo, on his own initiative, makes plans for the trip from the college law school to the rebuilt Sartoris home. Loosh would have simply announced the death of Bayard's father and left the practical details to Bayard.

Ringo, however, makes plans, preparing for the needs of Bayard. We see in the story that Ringo and Bayard have been separated in the rebuilt house, and that Ringo has slid from Granny's partner in crime in the middle of the novel to a man with real ability and sense and no place to exercise them by the end. While Bayard prepares for a

career in law, Ringo is reduced to fitting himself into low nineteenth-century expectations of what black people should be allowed to do.

While the novel is still Bayard's story, Faulkner, always aware of the difficulties of being black or Indian, nonetheless wants us to see the unfulfilled lives of black people as early as the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction. That there is no place for an able Ringo in the nineteenth century creates themes of racial injustice Faulkner explores in narratives set in the twentieth century, such as Intruder in the Dust (1948) and Light in August.

Social Concerns

William Faulkner is said to have recommended that readers unfamiliar with his work should begin with The Unvanquished. Probably his reason for this choice was not the book's relative ease of reading or quality, but because The Unvanquished provides an historical origin for the Southern attitudes and dilemmas that have shaped the South since the Civil War and hence Faulkner's fiction. Because historical fiction is generally not respected by critics, none have thought of The Unvanquished as historical fiction, although the novel comes close to that genre as it dramatizes how Southerners and the Sartoris family of Mississippi in particular responded when the war began to turn against the South with the fall of Vicksburg in 1863 and later with an action highlighted by invasion, defeat, Reconstruction, and to a limited extent, renewal. While The Unvanquished shows an erosion of values for the Sartoris family and their neighbors through the war prior to Bayard's affirmation of value in "An Odor of Verbena," the novel has many panoramic scenes that give a sense of what it was like to be invaded, to suffer privation, to have hopes of freedom unable to be realized, and to fear the absence of order and the loss of control.

While readers care most about the Sartoris family and the blacks whose destiny is tied to theirs, one is given a sense of an historical period from a Southern perspective through their representative suffering, defeats, and victories and their careful ties to larger historical events.

Techniques

The Unvanquished is a series of linked short stories that compose a novel; it is in the tradition of such works as Joyce's Dubliners (1914) and Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919; see separate entry), both of which give portraits of places and people that effectively examine societies and cultures. Where Joyce can use his stories to analyze the effects of religion and colonialism on his Dubliners, Faulkner uses his stories to create a sense of what the South was like when it began to lose the Civil War, when it was defeated, and what it was like in the decade after the war's end. Panoramic scenes of the South, usually gleaned from the travel of the Sartorises, give a good idea of the privation of the war with houses burned and white people living in the slave quarters, but sometimes the details gathered from story to story do powerful work as well, such as the substitution of Pokeberry juice for ink, the use of peeled wallpaper for writing paper, the borrowing of clothes and the patching of them with feed sacks, the chewing of bark instead of tobacco, and a hunger so overwhelming that inedible weeds pass for food.

Unlike Joyce and Anderson, Faulkner is examining a relatively constant group of characters in one family, with Bayard not only the narrator but also the central character tying the stories together. Consequently, Faulkner's The Unvanquished seems more like a novel than the linked stories of Joyce and Anderson. The gaps in time between Faulkner's stories seem no more than the gaps in time between scenes of the same story, so that The Unvanquished is more unified than either Anderson's work or Joyce's. As a result Faulkner's novel has the social bite that Joyce's and Anderson's narratives possess, but it also has the unifying central story of Bayard to make the book read like a novel.

The scenes themselves, refracted through the narration of Bayard, frequently elevate to a mythic power, as in the scenes showing the river crossing in "Raid" or the nightmarish pursuit of Grumby in "Vendee," although sometimes, as in the early stories, one encounters the style of comic exaggeration characteristic of nineteenth-century Southwestern humor as in the scene when Bayard, Ringo, and John Sartoris capture a number of Union soldiers by bluff and accident in "Retreat." Bayard's reflective narration, where sometimes he is looking back at events from the perspective of maturity while at other times he is a character enmeshed in the action, is a key to the manipulation of the tone of the scenes.

While most of the symbols in Faulkner's narrative occur through the repetition of objects and the emotional ties that characters have toward them, such as the verbena treasured by Drusilla, whose fragrance is more powerful than the stench of battle. When Drusilla leaves a sprig for Bayard following his encounter with Redmond, she acknowledges his courage even though she wishes he had killed his father's slayer. Other symbols are tied to the action through parallels to sacred texts such as the Christ story.

When Bayard meets Redmond unarmed he is rewriting the old justice of revenge and substituting a Christ-like response.

Themes

"Ambuscade," the first of the seven stories that compose The Unvanquished, shows Bayard, then twelve years old and the protagonist-narrator of the novel, acting out the siege of Vicksburg with his black friend, Ringo, before Loosh, a slave and Ringo's uncle, sweeps their model aside, suggesting that Vicksburg had already fallen. With the fall of Vicksburg the North controlled the Mississippi River and had split the South in two; Gettysburg, another Southern defeat which occurred at the same time, was the last major attempt by a Southern army to invade the North and capture Washington, D.C. Like most retrospective first-person narrators, Bayard is split in two; with respect to the action, he is a character in its time and place, but as a narrator he is looking backward from maturity and able to determine the significance of action and events. What is dramatized in the story are the illusions of Bayard and Ringo, their hopes of Southern victory, and their belief in Southern heroism, particularly as it is embodied by Bayard's father, Colonel John Sartoris. These illusions are shattered at first by Loosh, and then by the decisions of John Sartoris and Bayard's grandmother, Rosa Millard, to hide the stock in a pen hidden from sight and bury the family silver. Finally, the appearance in the story of the Yankees themselves, whom Bayard and Ringo take a shot at, challenges their hopes. The slide in family values begins here innocently enough with Miss Rosa's attempt to punish the boys' bad language while she lies to the commanding officer about their whereabouts. Here the Yankees do not seem a threat, as the Union commanding officer, Colonel Dick, knows that the boys are hidden under Granny's skirt but sympathizes with her position humanely.

In the following story, "Retreat," the Yankees are not so generous, as they burn down the Sartoris house, steal the family silver with the help of Loosh, and fire on the boys in frustration when they fail to capture John Sartoris. A few pages earlier John, Ringo, and Bayard by luck and daring capture several Union soldiers in what seems a boy's adventure, but the destruction of the house changes the character of the war for the boys and Granny. All call the Union forces "bastards" and Granny, in order to get home from an aborted trip, steals horses just as the boys did earlier and John has with his irregulars. John's command is reminiscent of the guerrilla warfare of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and because of the nature of his command, he has a price on his head as if he were a criminal rather than a soldier. Heroic valor in The Unvanquished undercut story by story; it exists, but Faulkner worries when courage is separated from value.

Race, just as in Light in August (1932) and Absalom, Absalom! (1936) is sympathetically treated. Loosh's dreams of freedom are clear in "Ambuscade," and his rejoinder to Granny about leading federal troops to the buried silver is telling: "Let God ax John Sartoris who the man name that give me to him. Let the man that buried me in the black dark ax that of the man who dug me free." While most of the Sartoris' slaves are loyal to the family almost as in feudal obligations, Loosh and many others later will leave their masters, for Loosh temporarily, to wander the roads in pursuit of freedom in what Faulkner characterizes as a religious revelation.

"Raid" tells of the journey of Granny and the boys to Hawkhurst, an Alabama plantation owned by Bayard's aunt and cousins, the Hawks, and a further journey by Granny to see Colonel Dick about the stolen stock and the missing family silver, before Granny, Ringo, and Bayard return home. Two powerful panoramic scenes occur in the story, one showing the de struction of the plantation homes that Granny and the boys pass on the way to Hawkhurst with white masters living in the slave quarters, and the other showing the mass migration of slaves who, like Loosh, pursue freedom and the northern soldiers with religious ecstasy. Despite nearly drowning in a river with the black people on the road, Granny is able to see Colonel Dick, who offers restitution.

However, when Granny's oral descriptions of the missing slaves, mules, and silver are written down, the facts are confused: her two mules become 110, her two slaves become over a hundred, and the one chest of silver becomes ten. With Ringo taking the lead, this comic mistake develops into a series of swindles in which Union horses and mules are stolen by forged orders as Granny and the boys become thieves by choice rather than by accident.

The plight of the black people who see freedom as salvation is movingly presented, as many risk death for an undefined goal that the North has promised in the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation without really understanding the measure as anything more than a wartime stratagem. Drusilla's explanation of why she no longer needs to sleep is also moving.

With war removing young husbands and houses looted and burned, the place and value of civilian living is lost. Drusilla responds to the war and the invasion of her country much like veterans from World War I; her traditional femininity is eroded just as, in a different way, Granny's traditional values are corrupted. Tales of the Lost Cause, even before the loss of the Civil War, are beginning to take place as Drusilla relates the 1862 Great Locomotive Chase to Bayard and Ringo in a style reminiscent of later heroic stories of Southern resistance.

"Riposte in Tertio" primarily is Rosa Millard's story. Summarized are the many swindles of horses and mules based on forged papers and the many times those same mules and horses are sold back to the Union army. Ab Snopes aids Granny, but steals some of the money from the sale of the stock, and, when Union troops are to pull out and end the business, Ab informs on Granny and ultimately leads her to deal with Grumby, supposedly an irregular operating under Bedford Forrest but really a bully, thief, and murderer. Ringo and Bayard distrust Ab, but Granny has been Robin Hood to so many poor people that she has not provided for John Sartoris, who needs to rebuild his fortune. Greed for her own undoes Granny, and leads to her murder.

Her corruption grows even as she helps the poor.

Faulkner originally conceived the stories as a series of adventures for Bayard and Ringo when he wrote the first five stories of The Unvanquished for The Saturday Evening Post. Bayard, Granny, and John Sartoris all recognize that Ringo, the slave, is more intelligent and gifted than Bayard. Ringo takes an aggressive hand in helping Granny in

her life of crime, and he quickly sees through Ab's tricks and manipulation. He even saves Granny and Bayard from capture by Union forces early in the story. Clearly, Faulkner is making a case for the freedom of black people in his portraits of Bayard and Ringo. The boys sleep in the same room in the beginning of The Unvanquished when both are twelve; the separation of slave and master has only begun, usually in the form of experiences Bayard has that Ringo is unable to have, from eating coconut cake to seeing the train at Hawkhurst prior to federal troops tearing up the line. By the end of the novel, Ringo becomes a talented servant, but his potential is thwarted by social pressure, while Bayard studies to become a lawyer.

"Vendee" begins with the burial of Rosa Millard, while most of the action shows the pursuit of her killer, Grumby, by Uncle Buck McCaslin, Ringo, and Bayard. The action, which begins in December of 1864 and ends in the early spring of 1865, is nightmarish—descriptions of days and nights are blurred by fog, rain, and the obsession to kill Granny's killer. When Matt Bowden, one of Grumby's gang, tricks Uncle Buck, Ringo, and Bayard, wounding Uncle Buck, the pursuit of Grumby is done by Bayard and Ringo alone. Worn from the pursuit of Ringo and Bayard, Bowden and Bridger, another gang member, bind Grumby, giving him to the boys, but freeing him and giving him a pistol as they ride away. Ringo rescues Bayard when Grumby charges and fires the pistol, but Bayard shoots Grumby. Both peg the body of Grumby at the door of the compress in which Granny was shot, and they tie the hand of Grumby, cut off from the arm, on the marker on Granny's grave. As the boys return home, they discover that the war is nearly ended and that Drusilla, who wound up fighting with John's troops, has accompanied him home. Although Uncle Buck praises Bayard as John Sartoris' boy for this deed, it is savage and in marked contrast to what Bayard does in the concluding story in facing his father's killer. Peace ends the nightmare of war and revenge justice; Bayard will have to come to terms with what he has done.

"Skirmish at Sartoris" has a double action, one involving the rebuilding of the town after the war and the possible election of a black candidate for Marshal of Jefferson, and the other involving the moderately successful attempt to coerce Drusilla, who had earlier fought in John Sartoris's troop, into a dress and finally marriage to John Sartoris. The marriage is interrupted by the killings of two outsiders, the Burdens, who were trying to get a black man, Cassius Q. Benbow, elected, as Drusilla and John's former troops grab the ballot box and carry it off to John's rebuilt home and vote against the black candidate. The violence is almost a side bar to the story, since Drusilla's mother, Aunt Louisa, Mrs. Habersham, Mrs. Compson, and other Jefferson ladies assume that Drusilla is John Sartoris's mistress according to social probabilities and that the only cure is marriage. John Sartoris agrees to marry Drusilla, although it seems as if he does this to keep the women from bothering Drusilla. The stories of the Lost Cause begin here, as the women supply motives for Southern valor—to preserve "Southern principles of purity and womanhood." This falsification after the fact leads, as Faulkner was well aware, to a culture that thinks Gone with the Wind (1936) is Southern history, as the women fail to note or see the significance in what the men and Drusilla are doing.

"An Odor of Verbena" brings together several elements in the earlier stories; it erases and reinscribes the cour age of the Sartorises through the actions of John Sartoris, but

particularly through the actions of Bayard. John Sartoris has dominated and castigated a business partner of his, Ben Redmond, whom he has also beaten in a race for the state legislature. Redmond, psychologically pushed into a corner by John Sartoris, finally kills Sartoris. At the time of his death, in a last conversation with his son, Bayard, he feels the need to "'do a litte moral housecleaning'" and vows to meet Redmond unarmed. Bayard is pushed into pursuing revenge justice by nearly everyone—his teacher at law school, his father's friends who resemble vultures in Bayard's eyes, and most of all by Drusilla, who believes that "one human life or two dozen" are not worth anything in comparison to a dream of social improvement. Several people offer Bayard pistols and horses to make his journey from law school to home, but Bayard, who at 24 is not able to pursue Redmond as he had pursued Grumby, resists them all and walks into Redmond's office unarmed, suffers two shots to be fired at him which deliberately miss, before Redmond walks away and leaves town immediately. Bayard has renounced killing, and broken the cycle of revenge justice much in the manner of a Christ, but his victory is personal, not social.

The dream that Drusilla and Bayard discuss is similar to the American dream of individual betterment as seen in the writing of Ben Franklin and Jefferson, but Drusilla points out a difference between two persons with aristocratic ambitions, Thomas Sutpen and John Sartoris.

While Sutpen's dream, dealt with in Absalom, Absalom!, is just Sutpen, John Sartoris is "thinking of this whole country which he is trying to raise by its bootstraps, so that all the people in it, not just his kind nor his old regiment, but all the people, black and white, the women and children back in the hills who don't even own shoes—." What Drusilla means is that John's railroad, which he and Redmond built, will provide jobs and develop an economy destroyed by the war. Thus we see Sartoris not only rebuilding his own house but buildings in the town as well as the railroad. At the end of the story, Bayard is now the Sartoris. He has redefined the family courage and honor, but he is left to add flesh to his father's dream, adumbrated in an odd way by the McCaslins in "Retreat" with their folksy generous treatment of slaves.

While the plight of black people is not investigated in The Unvanquished with the same scrutiny one sees in Faulkner's Light inAugust, Go Down, Moses (l942), Absa/om, Absalom! or Intruder in theDust, Loosh and Ringo are important characters in the book. Bayard never stops believing that Ringo is smarter than he is, even at story's end when they are driven apart with John Sartoris's separate social arrangements in his home and society's racial separation. Ringo remains a talented, intelligent, loyal man with no real place to show what he can do. Loosh, who was drunk on freedom earlier in The Unvanquished, is, in the final story, back with the Sartoris family with the mentality of a slave rather than as with Ringo, the soul of a free man. Drusilla's undefined explanation of the dream of John Sartoris still leaves black people out.

Adaptations

Faulkner sold the film rights to The Unvanquished to MGM, but MGM never made a motion picture from the book, probably because Faulkner's truth about the Civil War period was dwarfed by the popular success of Gone with the Wind, which was published in 1936 and made into a motion picture in 1939.

Key Questions

Faulkner was working closely with materials based on his own family in Sartoris and The Unvanquished. Of the many biographies on Faulkner, Joseph Blotner's Faulkner: A Biography (1974) does the best job of dealing with Colonel John Falkner and his descendants who mirror the fictional John and Bayard Sartoris. John Falkner's military career during the Civil War, the shooting of Colonel Falkner, and the revival of the family fortunes through a railroad now a part of the Illinois Central are repeated in the novel. After reading the chapter, "The Ancestors," in Blotner, contrast and compare the factual details of the family to the fictional details of the novel to see how closely Faulkner is working with his sources and try to estimate why he makes the changes he does and their effects.

Fiction is sometimes very close to fact, and it is fascinating to see how close in the case of this novel.

Perhaps more important would be reading a good history of the South, such as C. Vann Woodward's The Burden of Southern History (1968, 1993) to get a sense of the area and the period. Ralph Burns's documentary on the Civil War, frequently shown on PBS stations, is invaluable in giving one a perspective of the war, its participants, and the civilians who suffered through it. Faulkner's Southern audience, to the extent he had one in the late 1930s, knew Southern history, although the rest of the United States was ignorant of the South and less interested than the South in the Civil War. Today knowledge of the particulars of Southern history, from the names of generals to a knowledge of specific battles, is missing even in the South. Faulkner traced his Sartoris family from a frontier past where setders were in pursuit of new cotton lands. His "aristocrats" are far different from the popular image of them today, and reading and discussing Southern history might be a good way to set Faulkner apart from Margaret Mitchell's gentry of magnolias and moonbeams.

1. What is the importance of Vicksburg in the Civil War and Faulkner's novel?

Why do you suppose that Faulkner began The Unvanquished at this point in the Civil War instead of earlier?

2. The Unvanquished follows the life of the family rather than the war through most of the book. What effects does the war have on the Sartoris family, their friends and relatives, and the slaves, both those attached to the family and beyond?

How are the enemy troops characterized?

Does their character change during the war?

3. How justified is Colonel Sartoris in his killing of the Burdens in "Skirmish at Sartoris"? Someone might like to see another treatment of this Reconstruction story in Faulkner's

Light in August. Is Sartoris's refusal to allow a black man to be a marshal justified, or is it merely putting down black people?

4. How are Drusilla, Granny, and Aunt Jenny changed by the war? How trapped is each by the war?

5. The Unvanquished begins with scenes showing John Sartoris telling stories to his family and working with family slaves to protect his stock and ends with stories of John Sartoris shooting a man too quickly and fostering through domination a hatred in Redmond that eventually kills Sartoris. What does John Sartoris's participation in the war have to do with the hardening of his character? Would the man before the war been likely to act similarly?

6. Compare the ambitions and abilities of Loosh and Ringo. What does Faulkner appear to suggest about freedom and independence with these characters, and particularly with the comparisons between Bayard and Ringo. Several black academics have dealt with Faulkner and black people, such as Charles Nilon in his Faulkner and the Negro (1965). Compare their perspective of these characters to yours.

7. The most active we see Bayard is in the pursuit of Grumby, his grandmother's killer, in Bayard's teens, and then in his facing of Redmond following the death of his father in "An Odor of Verbena." In "Vendee," Bayard ruthlessly pursues his grandmother's killer, while in the latter story he refuses to kill. Has Bayard matured, or do his differing responses fracture your sense of his character?

8. Why or why not do the linked short stories of The Unvanquished form a novel?

Literary Precedents

While this essay has already examined the tradition of linked short stories as novels and Faulkner's modifications in that tradition, the subject matter of The Unvanquished itself is part of a series of literary precedents about the South. One of the reasons why one of the aims of the novel is historical fiction is in some ways to revise myths of the Southern past much as Mark Twain did in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884; see separate entry).

Faulkner shows the myths of the Lost Cause beginning to develop in the war itself especially through the women in the novel such as Drusilla's mother, Aunt Louisa, Mrs. Habersham, and Mrs. Compson, who force Drusilla into marrying John Sartoris. In a letter to Granny, whom Aunt Louisa does not know has been killed, Aunt Louisa sees her husband having "laid down his life to protect a heritage of courageous men and spotless women" as a motive for fighting the war. When a community of women in Faulkner begin to repeat such notions, attributing causes to established facts, it is not long before a myth of the South develops, nicely expressed by relatively contemporary works to The Unvanquished such as Gone with the Wind (Margaret Mitchell, 1936; see separate entry) or by novels published shortly after the Civil War such as The White Rose of Memphis written by Faulkner's great-grandfather, William Clark Falkner. In rewriting the South of the Lost Cause, Faulkner concentrates less on Southern gentility and more on the skewering of values through the war and the war's inadequate solutions regarding race. While Bayard rights one tradition of revenge justice, the problem of Ringo's unplaced social talents remains.

Related Titles

Once Faulkner began writing Flags in the Dust, the early version of Sartoris, links to nearly all of the characters of what comprise Yoknapatawpha's fourteen novels and many short stories was in place. In Sartoris, the action is set shortly after World War I, although the Bayard Sartoris of The Unvanquished and the novel's Jenny Du Pre appear in the novel.

While The Unvanquished shows the beginning of the myths of the South, Sartoris shows the effect of those myths on the descendants of Colonel John Sartoris.

The courage with a purpose of the colonel is reduced to foolhardy daring in his descendants a few generations later, as characters are attracted to yet fear death, as the young Bayard does. The railroad which was a means of recouping family fortunes in The Unvanquished and seems heroic in itself in the stories of the Great Locomotive Chase becomes the more dangerous automobile and airplane in Sartoris. In place of Drusilla and Granny of The Unvanquished, one encounters Narcissa Benbow and a debased femininity. Where the Bayard of The Unvanquished acts to choose value, in Sartoris that value is replaced by a debased art, such as Horace Benbow's attempt to create perfect glass urns. Sartoris or Flags in the Dust is worth reading for those interested in Faulkner's Sartoris family, but one must remember that The Unvanquished, while dealing with a Civil War period, is nonetheless written later, and some details in both novels are not in agreement. For example, the Redmond of The Unvanquished is Redlaw in the earlier published Sartoris. Faulkner does not always check his texts, so his characters sometimes change due to his transforming imagination.

Since the bulk of the stories composing The Unvanquished were written while Faulkner was working on perhaps his best novel Absalom, Absalom! it is not surprising that parallels can be found between John Sartoris and Thomas Sutpen, the primary character of Absalom, Absalom!—

who appears in The Unvanquished as a mirror to better understand the ambitions of John Sartoris. As Drusilla remarks to Bayard in defending John Sartoris, Sutpen's "dream is just Sutpen" while John Sartoris is concerned about the welfare of the whole of his region.

Absalom, Absalom! is a great novel, a Southern version of the American dream of success in which Sutpen founds a family only to have it fail through the consequences of love and racial bias. The novel does an extraordinary job of showing the pioneering efforts of Sutpen as he carves an estate out of the wilderness, as Faulkner makes clear that John Sartoris and Sutpen were different from the planters of Virginia and the Carolinas, self-made men as opposed to aristocratic gentry.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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