Triumph in Defeat: The Unvanquished

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No Faulknerian critic seems to have started his or her discussion of The Unvanquished (1938) without neglecting its textual history. Curiously enough, it can be a series of stories for some and a complete novel for others. And yet, as form, it is not uncommon among Faulkner’s works, such as The Hamlet (1940), Go Down, Moses (1942), etc., which are considered episodic and often each story in them appears separately on purpose, standing out quite independent of the stories in a volume. Over three years from 1934, five of the six short stories were published in the Saturday Evening Post; namely, they were “Ambuscade,” “Retreat,” “Raid,” “The Unvanquished,” and “Vendée.” “Skirmish at Sartoris” that describes the immediate post-war period was the sixth story, published in Scribner’s Magazine (April, 1935).

The Unvanquished is not an accidental product, but Faulkner’s natural response to the time in the latter half of the 1930’s. Personally, he had finished Absalom, Absalom! and socially the fact should not be neglected that Gone with the Wind, treating similar themes to Faulkner’s, was selling very well. It was in 1937 that President Franklin Roosevelt gave an address in Gettysburg to the Civil War veterans. Faulkner wrote to Bennett Cerf, saying that “I have a series of six stories about a white boy and a negro boy during the Civil War... They should average between five thousand and seventy-five hundred words a piece. What do you think about getting them out as a book!”

In the process of finishing *The Unvanquished* Faulkner wrote another story named “An Odor of Verbena,” “one that would provide more density and resonance than “Skirmish at Sartoris,” with its almost conventional happy ending, could supply.” Thus, his contemptible, trash, ephemeral magazine stories have been reshaped into a complete novel.

It is apparent that during his revision process to make the whole more unified as a book, Faulkner intensified the role of the narrator. Bayard’s role in the book is to look back upon his experience in his boyhood; namely, Bayard, as a kind of historian who gives interpretations based on facts, as it were. In that way Faulkner tries to give true account of experience because for him retained feelings of it is more important than external facts. Just as dim light filters down through the lace curtain, the young Bayard’s experience filters down through the eye of the older Bayard. With a child as the main character, Faulkner takes advantage of the nature of the child, who can see but cannot understand or get the meanings of what is going on around him. And that is a kind of protection rather than his disadvantage. He knows what is happening but is protected from the reality of the experience because of being a child. And important is that his experience is real but unreal in another sense: there has to be a limit in terms of assimilation and acceptance. In “Retreat” the older Bayard remarks that “There is a limit to what a child can accept, assimilate; not to what it can believe because a child can believe anything, given time, but to what it can accept, a limit in time, in the very time which nourishes the believing of the incredible’ (48). Consequently, just as Benjy in the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* or Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the young Bayard

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Sartoris depicts the Civil War and Restoration. For Faulkner, 'victory requires no explanation. It is in itself sufficient: the fine screen, the shield; immediate and final: it will be contemplated only by history. While the whole contemporary world watches the defeat and the undefeated who, because of that fact, survived. As A. Bleikasten remarks, 'what calls for attention here is not so much the Sartoris tale as the telling and retelling through which it came into being, the subtle alchemy, of memory, imagination, and discourse by means of which facts have been gradually enriched, embellished, and woven into the finer fabric of fiction.'

The reader can observe Bayard growing up as he proceeds with reading the novel: in "Ambuscade" he and Ringo are twelve, and in "An Odor of Verbena," the last story, he has grown to be twenty-four, not identical with Ringo any longer. The presentation of events in chronological order in The Unvanquished may be responsible mainly for Faulkner's suggestion that The Unvanquished he advises a person to read first of his works, with which many critics are reluctant to agree as it may be not desirable for unexperienced readers to understand Faulkner's works as a whole. As Cleanth Brooks has pointed out, Bayard is one of Faulkner's motherless children, which makes an important theme in many of his works: without difficulty Temple Drake, Lena Grove, Hightower, Christmas, etc. are recalled on the same line. And usually they find a surrogate, replacing their real mother. In Bayard's case, his grandmother, Granny, plays his mother's role at the earlier stage in the novel, and later Drusilla becomes his mother-in-law, who is only eight years older than he is. The same critic observes that Faulkner takes the family seriously,

which is very important in the Southern ‘culture that provided him with his materials,’ whereas other critics quite simply tend to attribute it to the novelist’s family background and his disposition.

Making use of Bayard as an older narrator and commentator, the novelist experiments with a new way to narrate *The Unvanquished*. J. Pilkington remarks Bayard’s role as follows:

As a man looking back upon his childhood and youth he can select and recount those experiences he considers significant—events that made an impression upon him at the time and have continued to be vivid to him—and, when he wishes, he can reflect upon meaning of what he narrates. The *then* and *now* furnish points of comparison that neither Faulkner nor his readers can ignore. The novelist’s evident recognition of the need to add these passages, as well as their considerable length, helps to account for the fact that the revisions are much more expensive in the first three stories than elsewhere in the volume.

Though the heritage of the past in the South is the main theme all through the seven stories in *The Unvanquished*, one of its major concerns is, as we have discussed the role of the narrator, ‘the attributes of childhood and the process by which a child grows and matures. After this book the novelist continues to discuss the same theme in ‘The Bear’ (1942), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), and *The Reivers* (1962), respectively. Ringo’s presence at the very beginning of the novel suggests that white-black relations are also important, though they are subordinate in nature. When the essential subject of the novel is the influence of the Civil War upon the people of the South, they are both black and white.

Being too young to participate in the active fighting against the

North, Bayard and Ringo play the war games, being free from danger. Their living map is destroyed by Loosh, Ringo's uncle. This incident at the very beginning of "Ambuscade" is both symbolic and ominous of the losing war for the white South, and 'establishes expectations which are not satisfied until the conclusion of "An Odor of Verbena."' The game they play is, so to speak, a reflection of the real world, but not exactly true or up to date. When Bayard's Vicksburg and Corinth are swept flat, young as he is, Bayard notices Loosh looking at him with 'that expression' on his face, which is triumph, but he does not know the word yet. It is interesting to know that Bayard and Ringo, though distressed by Loosh, switch to another play of General Pemberton and Grant. For them these two games are not related each other. As well as the map the notion that playing General Pemberton is superior to playing Grant has become untrue, about which they are not allowed to know because of their innocence. Ringo does not know what Loosh knows; namely, General Sherman is going to sweep the earth and the race is going to be free. Cleanth Brooks remarks that Faulkner beautifully suggests the troubling effect on the boy to whom Loosh is an adult, even though a slave, and whose slumbering revolt is felt rather than understood, and whose triumph, which he would have to conceal from a white adult, he can intimate to the boy.

Through Bayard and Ringo Faulkner presents 'the free-and-easy relations between while master and Negro slave in the Old South, the peculiar intimacy between a man sure of his command and another who sees no possibility or feels no desire to challenge it,' as I. Howe indicates. Ringo will grow to be one quite like that; however, here

he is almost equal to Bayard. Immediately after the incident of the map, Bayard switches to another play of generals. In order to have Ringo as his partner, Bayard has to ask him to play General Pemberton, so that he may be soothed and join the play. He is not subservient to Bayard. Flinging the dust symbolized their friendship, which is to be elaborated as follows:

The arrangement was that I would be General Pemberton twice in succession and Ringo would be Grant, then I would have to be Grant once so Ringo could be General Pemberton or he wouldn't play any more. But now it was that urgent even though Ringo was a nigger too, because Ringo and I had been born in the same month and had both fed at the same breast and had slept together and eaten together for so long that Ringo called Granny "Granny" just like I did, until maybe he wasn't a nigger any more or maybe I wasn't a white boy any more, the two of us neither, not even people any longer: the two supreme undefeated like two moths, two feathers riding above a hurricane (9).

These two boys are compared to two moths that are no longer black or white. Two feathers, not by resisting it, but by escaping from it, ride above a hurricane, which can be received as a preliminary announcement of the social change to come. By paralleling new voices Loosh represents with Bayard-Ringo relations, their kinship is emphasized. However, the reader must be conscious of discrepancies between Bayard's feeling toward Ringo expressed in the above quoted passage and reality, or his behavior toward him. The fact shows that they are equal up to a certain point, which is shown through out the novel. There is no denying that Bayard is kind, considerate, liberal, but superior to Ringo who seems to accept inequality. Deep in heart Bayard senses the difference of the social conditions they are planted in which no words can explain. How close their kinship may be, after all, they cannot be free from some prejudices and secrets.
Bayard knows that "because niggers know, they know things; it would have to be something louder, much louder, than words to do any good" (5). Lee Jenkins, who considers the narrative as the whole, remarks that adolescent nostalgia "gives the novel its characteristic ambiance."  

Faulkner makes Ringo conspicuous and smarter than Bayard in a sense with his intelligence, which shows as J. Pilking says, the novelist's intention. However, Ringo's intelligence is somewhat limited. Bayard realizes that unless prompted by an immediate necessity Ringo had little interest in learning. It is obvious that during Ringo's assisting Granny to escape from the Yankees, Bayard withdraws. And until Granny's death is avenged, Ringo fully functions in the book. The same critic interprets this as follows:

...after Granny's death, Ringo's role in the book diminishes considerably, and in the last three stories he functions more as a source for humor than for action. While Bayard is developing morally and intellectually, Ringo remains a static figure much in the background. In "An Oder of Verbena," he wants to follow the same course of action Bayard and he took to avenge Granny's death. Batard remarks that Ringo was "twenty-four too, but in a way he had changed even than I had since that day when we nailed Gramby's body to the door of the old compress" (284). Ringo's lack of importance in the last part of the book leads the reader to believe that Faulkner did not intend to make race a central issue in The Unvanquished.  

In The Unvanquished no black characters, like Ned, Uncle Parsham and Lucus Beauchamp, are created. To be distinguished black characters they must have special qualities; that is, 'their ability to carry

13) John Pilkington, p. 201.
the special burden imposed on them by a caste society, to succeed in maintaining their dignity though they are denied the usual resources of pride and the ordinary protections..., according to C. Brooks. And Ringo can hardly fall under the category of Faulkner's admirable black characters in spite of his intelligence. To Bayard and Ringo, living in the fringe areas of the war, more than welcome is the Colonel's arrival home. They know it will bring them something very pleasant, glorious and much fun through the previous experience. Waiting for Father to begin the stories of battle and glory, Bayard recollects:

In the spring when he came home that time, we waited as we did now, until he was sitting in his old chair with hickory logs popping and snapping on the hearth and Ringo and I squatting on either side of the hearth, beneath the mantel above which the captured musket which he had brought home from Virginia two years ago rested on two pegs, loaded and oiled for service' (14).

For a Southern child like Bayard, Father in military action is heroism incarnate. However, this time it does not work out as they wish: upon dismissing the boys to bed, Father begins to carry the trunk with the family silver out and bury it in the orchard. Out of curiosity they observe the activities of Father, Louvinia and Loosh, which are ‘mysterious and exciting and only faintly ominous.

Bayard repeatedly mentions that Father was not big but the things he did made him big. The reader, however, cannot tell how physically big or small he was. There are some admirable instances that express something about his character. Upon greeting his mother-in-law, deliberately he stops below her ‘with his head bared and his forehead held for her to touch her lips to’ (11). In building the stock


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pen on the following day, Father appears big to his son, twelve years of age. To him ‘Father was everywhere’ and he says ‘Do this or that’ to the ones who are doing. Also he remembers that he ‘was the one worked faster and harder than anyone else’ (12). Also in “Retreat,” participating in capturing Yankees, the boys see Father command and maintain timely, strict control of the situation. He is heroic, but Bayard does not overlook his eyes ‘bright as a cat’s’ that may suggest his character and ultimate destiny.

As well as Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury, one of the best characters invented by Faulkner is Rosa Millard, whom he describes as ‘the old woman who held a family together, did the best she could to keep the Negroes fed and clothed, to look after the mothers a little more while the menfolks were off galloping around the country waving their swords after glory. Being very religious and high spirited, she represents old virtues and values of the Southern civilization that are undestroyed. In the incident of the boys’ hiding under her spread skirt, she lies to the colonel, who holds on to the value, too. For him, being a gentleman is much more important than being a colonel; that is something higher than his duty. We recall that just as being a gentleman is more important than being a judge for Judge Stevens in ‘A Rose for Emily,’ saying, ‘...will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad.’ Later Granny uses the word, ‘borrow’ when she steals a horse and insists upon it, not letting anyone drive it but herself as she is responsible for it. That is her excuse, and self-justifying that L. Jenkins criticizes severely.

One of the most striking instances of the thing that Ringo most admires in the whites—the assertive, triumphant, self-justifying

sense of the self in its dealings with the world—is revealed in Granny Millard’s prayer in the church as she kneels in acknowledge-
ment of the sin committed in the trading of the mules and horses. This defiant prayer, which itself almost seems a kind of sacrilege, appears to me to be perfectly consistent with the arrogance, the righteous and narcissistic self-justification that is a characteristic feature of Faulkner’s depiction of the Southern stance. There is no piety in it, no submitting of the vulnerable or sinful self before the judgment of a just or merciful transcendent God. A true recognition of responsibility for individual action is avoided, since Granny has already justified her actions to herself.

Out of her pragmatism, she uses her prayer, ‘notably lacking in awe and reverence and humility,’ either in church or on the road as filtering paper or a kind of due formality for her will to be done or to have been done. Ringo is a keen observer of Granny, saying, ‘I been knowed her all my life,’ and ‘She ’cide what she want and then she kneel down about ten seconds and tell God what she aim to do, and then she git up and do hit. And then that don’t like hit can git outen the way or git trompled’ (48, 66–67). It cannot be denied that there are affinities between her and ‘the hypocrites who love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the street, that they may be seen of men. By depicting this, Faulkner may wish to remind the reader of weakness or negative aspects of righteous people.

In The Unvanquished one of the major themes of “Father Abraham,” a new class rising up, is apparent. Rosa Millard never lets Ringo go when he drops ‘Mister’ in calling Ab Snopes. It is natural for her to correct young people and educate them to behave more decently. And yet, at the same time Faulkner presents us the society changing

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17) Lee Jenkins, p. 132.
19) St. Matthew. VI. 5.
with the rising of tenant farmers and profit makers in the South. They are middlemen without property or history just like Flem Snopes, Ab's father. Why does Miss Rosa Millard want to call the ungentlemanly man without any principles Mister Snopes? It may be implied that she would rather like to keep some distance between the Sartorises and the Snopeses than promote relations with undue familiarity with them. She does not get involved with him except for their business relations.

Rosa Millard, as a binding force in the novel, represents the old code: according to it women in the South are not killed, and through her experience "even Yankees do not harm old woman—" (107). But with Grumby, a leader of renegade gang, her effort to provide John Sartoris with capital after the war results in vain. What is mainly responsible for her journey? Safely we can attribute it to 'her almost religious respect for property.' To be decent with dignity, she arms herself with a hat borrowed from Mrs. Compson and rose cut tings all of which give her journey more formal touch. And simultaneously these gestures have the impliction of her limitation in recognizing what the reality is, providing the reader with a comical quixotic tone in the novel. Brooks, who has a more sympathetic view of her than Lytle, regards Rosa Millard as a casualty of the war together with Drusilla. Furthermore, Pilkington writes that her death at the hands of Grumby, a man who claimed to have been a Confederate soldier under Forrest, probably should be interpreted as the consequence of the shift in her motive from the community's welfare to personal gain, in other words, her vulnerability to the temptations posed by Ab Snopes. Upon their revenge taken, Ringo admits that 'it wasn't him or Ab Snopes either that kilt her' and that 'it was them mules, that first batch of mules we got for nothing' (128).

21) John Pilkington, p. 205.
Faulkner in describing Rosa’s death tries to be strictly factual, crowding off any tragic or sentimental images, which has a great impact on the reader. Now compared to a bundle of sticks without dignity or decency in them, she has turned to be part of everyday life. This is the point to be emphasized with the image of desolving, melting, mingling with earth the rain gives. At the very end of “Riposte in Tertio” Bayard recollects, “I sat there in the wagon in the cold rain and let her walk on into the wet twilight and never come out of it again’ (107). And next section named “Vendée” begins with her funeral scene carried out under rain, too. The rain is first suggested by ‘the dripping cedar grove’ (108), followed by umbrellas and splashing. Faulkner seems to underscore ‘for out of it (the ground) wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’22) ‘... then Ringo and I stood there and watched Granny going down into the earth with the quiet rain splashing on the yellow boards until they quit looking like boards and began to look like water with thin sunlight reflected in it, sinking away into the ground’ (109). There is the obvious avoidance of formality at the funeral scene. Paying no attention to ‘the big refugee preacher with his book already open, who is thought to be a more dignified preacher by Mrs. Compson and other Southern ladies, Fortinbride leads the service and shortly brings it to an end because of the rain. He says, “And what do you reckon Rosa Millard would say about you all standing around here, keeping old folks and children out there in the rain?” (109-110). Certainly, as Earle Birney said as early as in 1938, her spirit is conveyed in the title of the book by the novelist. She is eventually defeated but never licked. Lastly, ‘the inconsistencies and incipient break down of the old ethic’ related to Rosa Millard’s actions should not be overlooked.

22) Genesis. III. 19.
Immediately Ringo and Bayard react to the incident and take revenge for her death. This part sounds quite cruel, savage and highly improbable for boys fifteen years of age, at least from the viewpoint of the latter half of the twentieth century. Brooks remarks in favor of the novelist that 'it is not primarily a question of the boy's personal commitment to a code of retribution. Grumby must be punished; yet the country is absolutely lawless; there are no constituted authorities to whom he could appeal had he wished.' And Wittenberg underpins Brook's opinion indicating that the agents of that death come from within the Southern culture. Admitting that this incident signifies Bayard's actions after his father's death and that he has accepted the frontier notion of personal justice and carried it out, Pilkington considers it the least attractive incident in *The Unvanquished*.

Yet the reader is to find in the unattractive incident Faulkner's subtle art. The slow process of finding Grumby is symbolized by Ringo's cutting a notch in a pine stick nightly till he has to give it up to burn it for Uncle Buck. Also Faulkner succeeds in juxtaposing external facts with the retained feelings of experience in Bayard's mind: a momental occurrence is presented as a slow motion picture. Bayard narrates as follows:

All I know is, one second he was standing there in his muddy Confederate coat, smiling at us, with his ragged teeth showing a little in his red stubble, with the thin sunlight on the stubble and on his shoulders and cuffs, on the dark marks where the braid had been ripped away: and the next second there were two bright orange splashes, one after the other, against the middle of the gray coat and the coat itself swelling slow down on me like

26) John Pilkington, p. 206.
when Granny told us about the balloon she saw in St. Louis and we would dream about it (126).

Another beautiful passage in the same episode is about Bayard’s observation in his extremely tense situation, face to face with Grumby. While his eyes are no doubt on Grumby, who seems to be ‘examining a pistol for the first time, so slow and careful it was,’ he narrates, “There was a bird somewhere—a yellowhammer—I had been hearing it all the time; even the three flies swirling around the lantern’ (77). Here he is nervous enough to catch everything, including quite outside of his business. His concentration enables other senses alive and alert. The implication of the bird without any reaction to the three shots is in parallel with a great human drama, such as one that Bayard and Ringo are involved in. All of these, the flies and the bird, seem to reassure the continuity of ordinary life, together with Fortinbraide’s words: that is, “You have wood to cut and split” (109) in “Vendée,” and ‘the washing blowing soft and peaceful and bright on the clothes lines’ (83) in “Raid.” For Bayard, who has come home with Ringo, ‘the earth had sunk too now, after two months; it was almost level now, like at first Granny had not wanted to be dead either but now she had begun to be reconciled’ (127). And they both began to cry. His ‘exhaustion, emotional as well as physical, is eloquent of his state of mind’ as Brooks remarks.

Then in the last two stories, which tend to be read more seriously and symbolically, Drusilla Hawk takes Rosa Millard’s role, whereas Bayard takes Ringo’s. Drusilla as one of the three major women in The Unvanquished is a liberated woman in opposition to the Jefferson ladies represented by Mrs. Compson with their enforcement of moral standards in the community. She is an obvious epicene reincarnated just like Cecily Saunders in Soldiers’ Pay, and Linda Snopes in The Mansion. Faulkner suggests that there are affinities

between Drusilla and Phaedra in the Greek myth, who is described as a pitiful, brave woman with grace. In the mercy of Aphrodite she falls in love with her step son, Hippolytus, to find her love in vain and kills herself. During the war Drusilla abandons the traditional role of the Southern woman: she wears short hair and fights in man's clothes. However, after the war, even she is forced to give in to the inflexibility of the community and get married to John Sartoris. The Jefferson ladies force her to sacrifice herself for the sake of the respectability the Southern society has kept. And later we are to find her strictly bound by the old orders, according to which Bayard's revenge on Redmond is automatic without question. It should not be overlooked that though they seem to be alike in many ways, Drusilla and Aunt Jenny react differently to Bayard's decision not to kill. Moreover, a careful reader may notice Aunt Jenny excluded from the Jefferson ladies, and consequently the author's criticism. She has recently come to live with her brother John Sartoris and is an outsider.

In "An Ordor of Verbena" Drusilla wants to control Bayard: at first she acts as a seducer, 'the symbol of the ancient and eternal Snake' (167). Then she plays the role of the priestess to the ritual of revengeance for her husband, thinking it an inevitable duty for Bayard to perform it. When she affirms John's killing of the two carpet baggers, Bayard opposes it, saying, "They were men. Human being" (154). His ethic seems to be new and free from any preconceived ideas of the society, and belongs to a younger generation. And yet it is as old as Exodus in which the Ten Commandments reveals 'Thou shalt not kill.'

His belief is to be elaborated in the last episode of the section, converging into a focus upon his inevitable confrontation with Redmond. Cleanth Brooks observes this scene as an reflection of Faulkner's creed, one of his most powerful illustrations of bravery.

According to the critic 'this episode also constitutes Faulkner's most brilliant account of what he calls in his Novel Prize speech the proper subject matter for great literature: the problem of the human heart in conflict with itself. Here the conflict is in the heart of young Bayard Sartoris.' When he says that 'nearly every person close to Bayard certainly expects him to avenge his father,' the reader thinks of Aunt Jenny and Bayard. That is the society with the old codes represented by Professor Wilkins with his wife, Ringo, Drusilla, George Wyatt, etc. Aunt Jenny is the only person that suggests Bayard's revenge taking would be of little significance, saying, "You are not going to try to kill him. All right" (65). She tells him not to let it be his father 'because he's dead now' (165). Also in the next morning she repeats that even he would hide all day in the stable, she thinks of him as a hero. Certainly that is the role of a mother with compassion, understanding and above all pragmatism to Bayard at the end of the story of "An Odor of Verbena."

So I knelt beside the chair. ‘So yoy had a perfectly splendid Saturday afternoon, didn’t you? Tell me about it.” Then she put her hands on my shoulders. I watched them come up as though she were trying to stop them; I felt them on my shoulders as if they had a separate life of their own and were trying to do something which for my sake she was trying to restrain, prevent. Then she gave up or she was not strong enough because they came up and took my face between them, hard and suddenly the tears sprang and streamed down her face like Drusilla's laughing had. ‘Oh, damn you Sartorises!’ she said. ‘Damn you! Damn you!’ (174).

J. B. Wittenberg emphasizes on his awareness of John Sartorise's


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savageries and sees affinities between Bayard and Quentin since both of them realize their father's wishes. According to her 'Bayard invokes all of his father's unworthy deeds of recent years and struggles free from his father's destructive example in a way that Quentin, who fulfills Mr. Compson's verbal negations with the ultimate negative act, suicide, ...cannot.' As for his decision making in moral terms, Michael Millgate also remarks that 'the Colonel's last courageous gesture makes it possible for his son to repudiate violence and live, sets him free to perform his own act of courage and nonviolence.' Thus both Millgate and Brooks agree that it is a kind of transcending of the old code. Moreover, the former calls our attention to the fact that 'Bayard breaks with the formal pattern of revenge but he does not offend against the code's fundamental standards of bravery and personal responsibility.

In The Unvanquished Faulkner primarily reveals the major theme, the decay of the Southern code of honor. And he successfully does it by presenting the maturing of the young boy during his adolescence in the 1860's and '70. The novel fully proves what Sherwood Anderson assured Faulkner that this was sufficient for a proper subject matter. "You're a country boy: all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from."