

Complex Characterization in Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust*

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Flags in the Dust has a strange status within the corpus of Faulkner fiction. Written in 1926 and 1927, it was only published by Random House in 1973 (and a year later in paperback). Faulkner himself felt it would be the work that made his name as a writer.¹ He had sadly misunderstood the critical prejudices of the New York publishing world. It was only a simplified, pared-down edition that appeared finally in 1929 with the new title *Sartoris*.² Faulkner himself had not done the editing. It is not very difficult to appreciate the reservations of the publishing houses. The third novel of a little-known writer (and the first of the Yoknapatawpha series), *Flags in the Dust* is an embarrassment of stylistic and thematic riches. The oscillating focus between young Bayard and Horace Benbow, the much involved history of the Sartoris family, and the significance of Narcissa all serve, finally, to present an apparently fragmented picture. The seemingly abstruse characterization of the protagonist, young Bayard Sartoris, has made interpretation a challenge. The rash in medias res opening can certainly lead to confusion for those unaware of succeeding fictions of the Yoknapatawpha series.³ The purpose of this essay is to confront an issue that many readers have either skirted or claimed to be critically indeterminate—the identity and ramifications of young Bayard's distressed psyche. Melvin Backman, for example, writes that “the very nature of young Bayard's character—sullen, cold, reserved, and unanalytical—works against a reader's understanding of his inner life. As a result, Bayard's malaise seems in excess of its cause, and its effect upon the novel is oppressive.”⁴ In general a subtle reader of Faulkner, Backman here seems insensitive to the nontraditional techniques of characterization that Faulkner applies to his wrathful protagonist.

The portrayal of Bayard is complex. It proceeds not only through direct characterization but through indirect means as well. Direct characterization exploits a principle basic to characterization in nineteenth-century fiction. Character emerges through the direct depiction of the character in question, of his/her thoughts, indirect speech, participation in dialogue as well as through narratorial description, commentary, and evaluation. The character is seen largely from a single perspective.

¹William Faulkner, *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. J. Blotner (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 39. Letter to Horace Liveright, Nov. 30, 1927.

²Douglas Day, Introduction, *Flags in the Dust*, by William Faulkner, ed. Douglas Day (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. vii-xi. All future references to the novel are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

³*Sartoris* avoids some of these problems but not without sacrificing a good deal. In *Sartoris*, Horace's story is considerably reduced and, therein, his role of foil to young Bayard. The edited and original versions have been compared by Melvin R. Roberts in his *Faulkner's Flags in the Dust and Sartoris: A Comprehensive Study of the Typescript and the Originally Published Novel*, Diss. Texas (Austin) 1974; *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 35:471A.

⁴Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years, A Critical Study* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966), p. 7. Although his assessment is based on *Sartoris*, given the similarity of Bayard's portrayal in both versions (the reduced role of Horace notwithstanding), Backman's remarks may, not unfairly, be transferred to *Flags in the Dust*.

In *Flags in the Dust* Faulkner applies direct characterization but he unites it with indirect depiction.⁵ Character reaches the reader not only through the obvious mediation of the narrator but through that of other characters as well. Character manifests itself through the opinions of others, their interior monologue, the extensive use of foils/*Doppelgänger*, indirect interior monologue, and association with such supra-personal phenomena as the familial heritage of the Sartoris. The fact that Bayard, the protagonist of the novel, is actually present in only ten of its twenty-seven chapters clearly suggests Faulkner's heavy reliance on indirect characterization.

The reader's initial grasp of Bayard is indeed tenuous. Typical of modernist fiction, characterization emerges slowly, almost haphazardly. For most of Part One, Bayard is a mere specter; he has only a peripheral presence until the final pages. Simon, an old Negro servant, reports seeing Bayard slipping off the two o'clock train but Bayard does not arrive home until evening. In the meantime, through the anecdotes of old man Falls and Miss Jenny, the reader learns of the peculiar Sartoris genius for violent death. Forty odd years previous, old John Sartoris, founding patriarch of the Yoknapatawpha Sartoris, confronts, unarmed, his old nemesis Redlaw. The "dark shadow of fatality and doom" that crosses his brow the evening before his murder comes to rest on all the males of his line with the exception of his son Bayard, young Bayard's grandfather (p. 6). And, we are told, old John's younger brother, the first Bayard of the clan, crashes like a "shooting star," victim of a Yankee bullet that he invites through a reckless act of bravado (p. 22). Where does Bayard stand within this group of resolute men of action?

In the relating of the anecdotes, the narrator achieves more than an outline of familial history. Though physically absent, Bayard slowly becomes palpable to the reader, a case of characterization through familial association. His actual entrance is enigmatic, his first statement meaningless: "I tried to keep him from going up there in that goddam little popgun" (p. 44). Lacking context, his words have no referential value for his grandfather, old Bayard, to whom they are addressed or indeed for the reader. They do, however, suggest the psychological preoccupations of young Bayard, if only in a vague way. He goes on to recount wartime experiences, tales of "violence and speed and death" (p. 46). The death of his twin brother, John, recalls that of the great-uncle Bayard. John's death results from an act of drunken derring-do. His feeble Camel fighter, the "popgun" of earlier reference, is outclassed and outmanned by German Fokkers over the Belgian countryside. Bayard watches John plummet to his death. "Brooding savageness" characterizes the psychic strain that envelops Bayard.

In summary, Part One delimits phenomena central to both the history of the family and Bayard's personal fate—guilt, violence, and premature death. A long interlude ensues in Part Two during which Bayard recedes into the background. Characterization emerges through the recollections of Miss Jenny, Narcissa, and Aunt Sally. The reader learns more about the relationship that existed between Bayard and his brother, a relationship based on conventional sibling rivalries to be sure, but also on an uncommon love. The description of the relationship provides a context for Bayard's earlier puzzling remarks. The narrator takes up direct characterization only in the fifth chapter with the depiction of two violent, careless acts of Bayard—the joyride with old Simon and the romp on the spirited stallion. Each

⁵To depict a fictional character solely through indirect means is somewhat extraordinary. He/she would never appear physically within the scenario but only through the anecdotes or reflections of others and narratorial commentary. Within the Yoknapatawpha series, of course, characters are sometimes described in a given fiction but only physically appear in others of the series.

represents a bold, pointless challenge to what can only be called, however nebulously, fate. In each case, death, the eternal temptress of the malcontent, woos his disturbed soul.

The pattern of mixing direct and indirect modes of characterization established in Parts One and Two is maintained throughout the remainder of the novel. Part Three introduces the major foil of the novel, Horace. Although Bayard is seldom physically present, the emotional and intellectual disposition of Horace illustrates, through implied contrast, aspects of Bayard's character. Bayard's world of Byronic turmoil is juxtaposed to Horace's realm of serene, almost Olympian calm. Katherine Hodgkin draws an insightful comparison between the Byronic elements in Bayard's emotional make-up and the Keatsian overtones of Horace's speech and thought⁶. Bayard is a man of action who escapes the pain of self-reflection through vainglorious deeds; Horace is an aesthete who whiles away his time chasing phantom muses across the Elysian fields of his imagination. Horace's microcosm is bound by a cool, deathlike stasis. For him, "deed" entails the fashioning of an ornate, literary idiom and the occasional tryst. Bayard's temperament in no way resembles the self-reflective, lyrical posture of Horace. His is a trapped consciousness of a different stripe—a turbulent fusion of melancholy and vitalism. Phantasmagoric figures out of the past people his world. The oppression of knowledge, what the Germans call *Erkenntnisekel*, affects Bayard. Memory imposes a strangle hold on his consciousness, confines him within "the bleak and barren regions of his despair" (pp. 243-44). Neither alcohol nor his burning of John's personal effects frees Bayard of his guilt. His grandfather's fatal heart attack, brought on as it is by Bayard's joyriding, compounds this guilt. His sins allow no easy expiation. Taking to the air in an obviously defective experimental aircraft, Bayard plummets fatally out of the Ohio sky—victim of unsound aerodynamics and his own inscrutable rage.

The characterization of Bayard is no simple thing. Any description of that process will necessarily ape its indirection. The narrator does not reduce the complexity of Bayard through explanation or commentary. Events often reach the reader only after having passed through the alembic of other characters. The reader is exposed to different facets of Bayard's character as perceived by individual members of his family and social circle. It is in this "complex" way that characterization achieves fullness. The rendering of character here is multi-perspectival. Through what Arthur Kinney calls a "constitutive consciousness," the reader assembles a mental picture of the protagonist.⁷ The frustration that some have felt reading the more innovative of Faulkner's fictions originates often in the failure to make the shift of readerly role demanded by these works. One used to reading, for example, nineteenth-century realists like Balzac, Dickens, Fontane, and their modern imitators suffers rude awakening. Along with other modernists, Faulkner demands a new readerly stance. Throughout the novel characterization of Bayard fails to yield a lapidary, definitive portrait. He is viewed from a variety of perspectives that exploit direct and indirect characterization. Bayard never becomes a fixed point. Existential anti-hero, the eternal adolescent, victim of a "waste land" culture, Don Quixote *manqué*, all of these and more, Bayard's "air of smoldering abrupt violence" can be interpreted in a variety of ways, no one of which is self-sufficient (p. 76).

⁶Katherine C. Hodgkin, "Horace Benbow and Bayard Sartoris: Two Romantic Figures in Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust*," *American Literature*, 50, No. 4 (1979), pp. 647-52.

⁷Arthur Kinney, *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1978), p. 101. Kinney defines "constitutive consciousness" as "the integrated sum of our awareness of the structure of the work and the perceptions of all the characters whose thoughts are explicitly or implicitly provided for us" (p. 101). Incidentally, although I agree with Kinney's analysis of Faulkner's narrative technique, I find his ascription of "generosity" and selflessness to Bayard's death inappropriate. In my view, Bayard remains cavalier and death provoking to the end.

The opinion of Backman quoted earlier concerning the essential unknowability of Bayard's dilemma is representative of certain traditional opinion on two basic issues: characterization and indeterminacy. The above comments address the problems of Faulkner's nontraditional characterization. A little needs to be said on indeterminacy (*Unbestimmtheit*). The term is of course that of the Polish aesthetician Roman Ingarden.⁸ He posits that the literary work raises issues, generates certain questions that it itself does not provide sufficient clues to answer. A given reading never exhausts the meaning of a text. Informed interpretation acknowledges its intrinsic limits and never construes its partial understanding as commensurate to the plethora of meaning a text houses. What Backman calls "the tendency to indulge in romantic glorification" is an attack on indeterminacy in general and its generous presence in *Flags in the Dust* in particular.⁹ "Romantic" is synonymous with a vague, pre-verbal disposition that does not lend itself to explication. To call Bayard's malaise, his inner rage, "romantic" ignores what is indeed determinate about it—its causes. These are multiple: genetic—the Sartoris heritage of rash and violent deaths; historical—"Along with so many young men of the 'lost generation,' he [Bayard] has been too traumatized by the first world war to engage in any enterprise other than self-destruction";¹⁰ social—violence as an American way of life (and death), class decline, Bayard's social redundancy; psychological—Bayard's inability to overcome his frightful and vainglorious attitude toward war. What remains, however, *indeterminate* is the proportioning of the above as causal factors. Within this multiperspectival text, the various characters see Bayard's situation in light of the particular relevance it holds for each personally. In this, Faulkner recognizes relativity as an inevitable ontological fact and complex characterization as the most efficacious mode for the exposition of that relativity.

⁸See Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 170-79, for a useful discussion of Ingarden's theory of indeterminacy.

⁹Backman, p. 7.

¹⁰Hodgin, p. 652.