

ANALYSIS

Sartoris (1929)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“*Sartoris* [was] published in 1929 with editorial cuts. *Flags in the Dust* (1973) is the full text. Bayard Sartoris comes home to Jefferson, Mississippi from combat as an aviator in World War I, in which his twin brother John, also a flyer, has been killed. His grandfather, old Bayard, head of the Sartoris banking interests, and Miss Jenny, old Bayard’s aunt, and others, including prewar associates and black tenants, frame young Bayard’s attempted reentry into normal life, along with a complex family background of feudal tradition, stubborn pride, and a certain ‘glamorous fatality’ bound up in the family names themselves. The names recall old Bayard’s father, John, the founder of the Sartoris house in Mississippi, and his brother, another Bayard, killed in the Civil War, as well as young John, who all exist as active presences and influences, ‘palpable ghosts.’

Desolated by his twin’s death, and the deaths of his wife Caroline and their infant son, Bayard rides, drives, drinks, and hunts with cold recklessness, alone in the ‘bleak and barren world’ of his despair, deliberately courting death. He marries Narcissa, of the prominent Benbow family, to whom Byron Snopes, a bookkeeper at the bank, has been sending anonymous letters of crazed lust, and whose brother Horace, like Bayard, has returned home from the war obsessed with a poetic image of ‘the meaning of peace.’ But even his guilt over old Bayard’s death from heart failure during a wild auto ride, can alter his despair. He leaves home, wanders in South America and the U.S., and is killed testing a new kind of aircraft he seems to know is unsafe. On the day he dies his son is born and named Benbow Sartoris, Narcissa’s gesture away from the Sartoris nomenclature, the ‘dusk’ of names ‘peopled with ghosts of glamorous and old disastrous things’.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 670

“Faulkner is not a romantic seeing his characters and locale through a haze of glamour and melodrama. On the contrary, he handles quite realistically a theme—the making of a myth—which engenders romantic attitudes on the part of the characters. Time and again, the caustic remarks of Miss Jenny throw the romantic actions of young Bayard into perspective.... An analysis of the structure of *Sartoris* shows even more clearly that Faulkner is unimplicated in the romanticism of young Bayard. The actual events take place in approximately a year. In that time Bayard returns from France, makes a few determined efforts to kill himself, marries Narcissa and fathers her child, contributes to the death of his grandfather, and finally finds the death he has been seeking so persistently. This sequence of events, chronologically arranged, is sufficient to establish post-war disillusionment, *Weltschmerz*, and the death-wish as the theme of the novel, if that were Faulkner’s intention. But the relative unimportance of this chronological progression is demonstrated by the fact that we only realize what is happening after it is already concluded....

The thematic action of *Sartoris* takes place not over a period of months but in a time span covering four generations, flanked by the Civil and First World Wars and by the two John Sartoris. The position that Colonel John Sartoris holds with respect to this larger time pattern is duplicated by his great grandson’s within the shorter period. The influence exerted by the former over his heirs is repeated in young John’s more personal and immediate control over his brother’s life. Consequently, young Bayard has to come to terms with both pasts, particularly since they reinforce and repeat one another.... Thus, in *Sartoris* the characters’ perspective on the way is conveyed by the obviously romantic descriptions of the Civil War which glorify the courage and gallantry of the Confederate soldiers.... Hence we get antithetical pictures of the recent struggle: there is little similarity between Cadet Lowe’s envious glorification of battle and Sergeant Madden’s painful memories in *Soldier’s Pay*, or between Chick Mallison’s youthful vision of the glorious field of combat and his uncle’s experiences of blood, dirt, and isolation in *Knight’s Gambit*....

Each post-war generation must rediscover disillusionment which must, in turn, be replaced by a renewed faith in the legend. In other words, the legend which has its source in history finally replaces history. Thus, it is time and the retelling that have made the Civil War glamorous and imaginatively compelling, filling it with gallantry and the splendor and gloom of old battles. The clash of the legend and the actual experience of war is responsible, in part at least, for Bayard's frustration.... Just as the Civil War becomes a legend finer and more glamorous than the reality so the history of the family becomes a myth. The word 'Sartoris' becomes pregnant with accumulated meanings and emotions. Gradually Colonel John Sartoris ceases to be remembered as an individual with certain specific physical and mental characteristics and with human weaknesses and inconsistencies. The concrete details of his appearance found in *The Unvanquished* are absent from *Sartoris* even though he is an integral part of the thematic action. What we have is a pageant in which the central figure is not a man but rather a symbol, namely, 'Sartoris'....

History concerns itself with a rational account of causes and effects; legend is content to glorify those actions which stir human emotions and the imagination. The legend of John Sartoris is much more potent and effective than the man could ever be.... His son can still defy the precept...and refuse to kill Redmond. But his great grandson is helpless before the cumulative force of the legend which demands his conformity in spite of circumstance and his own nature. Only in the few interludes when he is hunting or working the land can young Bayard escape the pressure of the past as revealed in the interlocking legends of the Civil War and Colonel John Sartoris. Imperceptibly, the legend had been transformed into a precept which both regulates and evaluates behavior....

The repetition of the names John and Bayard though four generations of Sartorises, while confusing to the reader, is actually a way of stressing the power of the Sartoris dream legend. The names not only repeat the past verbally but create an obligation for their bearers to do so in action. Colonel John Sartoris knowingly walks to his death; his son repeats the gesture, against his own inclination, because he is a Sartoris and it is expected of him. Young John goes up in his plane expecting death; two years later his brother finally succeeds in destroying himself in the same manner. Thus, the relation of a Bayard to a John Sartoris is re-enacted. Significantly, the actions of the two Bayards are conscious imitations which scrupulously reproduce the gestures, not the spirit, of a John Sartoris. However much they feel themselves committed to the family tradition, such imitation cannot help but be a violation of their own integrity. The young Bayard of *Sartoris* refuses, however, to admit that there is a conflict, though he feels himself being destroyed by it. Young Bayard's pursuit of death seems romantic and insufficiently motivated because the family myth is continually interposing itself between him and his experience. Thus, it is impossible for him to reconcile the two wars, one glamorous and significant, the other terrifying and incomprehensible....

The untamed horse, the speeding car, the untested plane: each is a propitiatory ritual performed on the altar of the two John Sartorises.... And like the Colonel's death, Johnny's death is an even more potent influence on Bayard than his living presence had been. He feels a mixture of violent regret, responsibility, and envy which pervades his every action. The thought that he had been turned back by a spatter of bullets across the nose of his plane, that he had put his own safety before that of his brother, returns to haunt him. The more recent death of his grandfather, in which he is also implicated, intensifies his feeling of concern for Johnny's death until it culminates in a semi-hysterical denial of responsibility.... There is no way of establishing any human relationship, however transitory, as long as Bayard feels compelled to act out the role of the Sartoris to its bitter conclusion....

Yet it is his desire to terminate his involvement in the Sartoris legend that leads him to marry Narcissa. Her aloof but steady presence during his convalescences establishes her in his mind as part of, yet a bulwark against, his own violence.... The violence he deliberately seeks out is completely alien to her nature and past. Consequently, she cannot give him the comprehension he desires and her inability to do so is only intensified by her total lack of imagination and her essential self-centeredness. Narcissa's motives for accepting Bayard seem every bit as devious and cross-grained as his. Her reason appears to be similar to that of Margaret Powers [*Soldier's Pay*], for both identify a dead man with a living one who seems to need their care.... She is outraged, not because Bayard risks his life, but because he does it in her presence and so reminds her of Johnny.... By her marriage to Bayard, Narcissa pits her own serenity and the Benbow pattern of life against the Sartoris violence and brooding awareness of the past....

Both Horace and Narcissa are...free to shape their own lives and to respond to experience without inhibiting preconceptions. But since they too choose to live by illusion, the original contrast between Benbow and Sartoris is at least partially obscured. The only difference is that the Benbow myths are personal rather than familial. Horace's takes the form of an exaltation and treasuring of beauty....The agony and the evil in life remain peripheral to his vision until he is forced through the purgative experience of *Sanctuary*. Narcissa's blindness, on the other hand, pertains only to herself and to her belief that she is indeed, to us Horace's phrase, the unblemished, the inviolate 'bide of quietness.' This illusion of her own innocence persists despite her clear vision of and active engagement in a fallen world. Accordingly, she can accuse Belle of having a backstairs nature and express her abhorrence of Horace's relationship with Belle, even as she holds the latest letter from Byron Snopes in her hand. Her sense of moral superiority is fostered by her conviction that nothing has actually happened....

The existence of the letters constitutes an everpresent threat to that image of herself which she is determined to preserve. Self-deception imperceptibly merges into hypocrisy as she lies to Miss Jenny. And an excessive concern with appearances takes the place of any genuine sense of ethics.... Unlike Narcissa, Horace is aware of his own limitations and of the nature of his illusions. Yet eagerly he withdraws to his bedroom where he can lose himself in a world created by his imagination.... The Sartorises are also moving romantically, finely, and a little tragically in self-imposed roles. And like Horace, they find that they cannot stop playing no matter how disastrous the consequences are. The only difference is that they lack Horace's ironic self-consciousness which enables him to recognize that it is an illusion to which he is responding and even to admit his own share of responsibility.... This juxtaposition of the play [role-playing] and reality actually telescopes the whole theme of *Sartoris*....

Of all the characters, only Miss Jenny appears able to make an effective compromise between past and present and between illusion and reality.... Always she is waiting for the news that one or both of them [the two Bayards] have fulfilled their obligation to their name and ancestors by departing life in fittingly dramatic fashion. Actually, by her semi-humorous carping on the inevitable end of each Sartoris, she contributes to that end by admitting the closed nature of the pattern of life they have embraced. The two sides of Miss Jenny enable her to recognize simultaneously both the power and the emptiness of the Sartoris dream and tradition. On the one hand, she weaves a legend about the name of the first Bayard Sartoris, making a significant focal point for the whole Civil War out of a reckless and useless gesture. On the other hand, she is the first to deflate not only young Bayard's actions but the whole tradition which, in fact, she has helped to establish. Her willingness to criticize as well as admire and to modify as well as preserve reveals a flexibility lacking in the male Sartorises....

The Sartorises chose to act in terms of legend instead of history. Out of 'the dusk people with ghosts of glamorous and old disastrous things,' out of the stories of Charlemagne and Roland, the feats of gallant knights and the panoply of ancient battles, they created a legend of Sartoris and the Civil War in which disaster was made glamorous. But as this legend developed, it replaced history and itself assumed the validity of a historical pattern. Each of the Sartorises seeks to re-enact this pattern in his own life because he believes that only in this way can he fulfill his obligations to the past and perpetuate his traditions. At this point the myth created and controlled by the Sartorises asserts its control over them.

Miss Jenny enriches and embellishes her account of Bayard Sartoris' death until she herself cannot distinguish between what actually happened and her dramatized version. The legend and not the facts of history sends young Bayard on his search for death. The irony attendant upon those who play the game of 'Sartoris' is that their lives are, in fact, most determined at the very moment they most strongly assert their independence from all compulsions. By their worship of the glamorous and old disastrous things they have put they sound of death and fatality into the name of Sartoris. At this point they are themselves made into pawns, powerless and expendable, in a game whose rules they formulated for their own destruction."

Olga W. Vickery
The Novels of William Faulkner
(Louisiana State 1959, 1964) 15-27

“In *Sartoris* the reviewers sensed the beginning of a larger and perhaps more enduring preoccupation than those found in the first two novels. ‘In *Sartoris*,’ said an unsigned review in the *New Statesman and Nation* (April 2, 1932), ‘we are given a picture of the South, of four generations and two wars, tossed at us apparently haphazard, yet more complete, because more stimulating to our imaginations, than in many volumes of detailed family chronicles.’ The sense of family tradition, new to his fiction, was recognized elsewhere as well, though reviewers were for the most part unfavorably disposed. Willard Thorp, writing in *Scrutiny* (September, 1932), called the novel a product of the influence of *Beau Geste* and *Death of a Hero*, complained of its repetitions and bad literary ‘echoes,’ and went on to say: ‘Faulkner, if he goes on at this rate, can easily lead the pack that helps the *Saturday Evening Post* sell mouthwash to 50 million Americans.’

L. A. G. Strong, however, spoke in the *Spectator* (February 27, 1932) of Faulkner’s genius, in fact, suggested that he was one of a very few to whom the term *genius* could be applied. In general, the English reviews, which adopted a ‘watch-and-wait’ attitude, were kinder than the American. The most penetrating review of *Sartoris* was written, some eight years or so after its publication, by Jean-Paul Sartre (*Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, 1938) and was, of course, aided by Sartre’s knowledge of the fiction published by Faulkner since 1929.”

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 16

“Faulkner’s third novel, *Sartoris* was his first book to deal with Yoknapatawpha County and its people, the ‘postage stamp’ of land so like that in which Faulkner spent his life. In *Sartoris* are found characters and themes—some only suggested, some almost completely drawn—of later Yoknapatawpha County stories, the raw material for the building of an entire fictional world. Structurally, however, it is one of Faulkner’s weakest novels. The elements of the story are placed in propinquity to one another but never fully integrated; the lives of the characters are intertwined more by circumstances than by any necessity springing from character itself. As a result, the book is episodic, loosely tied together by the linking of temporal events and by the contrast between the remembered past glory of the Sartoris family and the actual present. Although the action takes place in 1919-20, the broad framework of the story embraces eighty years (from the Civil War to the 1920s) of the history of the Sartoris family. The action begins in Jefferson in 1919, as Colonel Bayard and the elderly pauper Will Falls evoke the ghost of Colonel John Sartoris, dead fifty years. The family history...is sketchily revealed through the reminiscences of the characters as the story progresses...

LIVING CHARACTERS

Colonel Bayard Sartoris, *bank president, aged 69*
Virginia [Miss Jenny] Sartoris DuPre, *Colonel Bayard’s aunt, aged 80*
Bayard Sartoris, *Colonel Bayard’s grandson, aged 26*
Narcissa Benbow, *later Bayard’s wife*
Horace Benbow, *Narcissa’s brother*
Will Falls, *friend of late Colonel John Sartoris, aged 93*
Byron Snopes, *bank clerk*

DEAD CHARACTERS

Colonel John Sartoris [1823-76], *Colonel Bayard’s father*
Bayard Sartoris [1838-62], *Colonel John’s brother*
Johnny Sartoris [1893-1918], *Colonel John’s great-grandson, twin brother of youngest living Bayard*

SARTORIS FAMILY HISTORY

John Sartoris arrived in Jefferson in the early 1830s, bought property four miles from town, and built his house. There, in 1850, his son Bayard was born. His mother-in-law, Mrs. Rosa Millard, came to live with him and raise the child, whose mother had died in giving birth. In 1861 Sartoris organized a regiment and, as its colonel, led it to Virginia; the following year, however, the regiment deposed him and elected

Thomas Sutpen colonel. Sartoris, resentful of his men's defection, returned to Mississippi and organized a unit of irregulars. Just before the second battle of Manassas his rash and fiery young brother Bayard was killed in an attempt to raid a Yankee commissary tent for a tin of anchovies.

Mrs. Rosa Millard was killed by the leader of a lawless band of local poor whites in 1864. Colonel Sartoris returned home at the end of the war with his dead wife's cousin, Drusilla Hawk, who had run away from home to fight for the Confederacy, and whom Sartoris soon married. He rebuilt his house, which had been burned by the Yankees, and led the county in resisting government Reconstruction policies by killing a pair of Northerners who were attempting to ensure the Negro right to vote and run for office. In 1869 his youngest sister, the widowed Virginia (Miss Jenny) DuPre, came from Carolina to live with him. His railroad, which connected with the railroad in Memphis and bisected the county north and south, was completed in 1873. He ran for the state legislature against his former railroad partner, Ben Redmond, now his rival and declared enemy, defeated him, and shortly afterwards was killed by him.

Bayard, a young man of twenty-four, faced his father's killer unarmed the next day, thus repudiating the family code of violence and vengeance. Bayard married and begot a son, John; the latter married and fathered twin sons, John and Bayard, before his death in 1901. The twins, inseparable from childhood, were mischievous and harebrained, and had to be sent to separate colleges because of their pranks. At the outbreak of the First World War they joined the R.A.F. John was killed in 1918 when he rashly attacked a group of more powerful German planes.

PRESENT ACTION

Bayard comes home from the war in the spring of 1919, still grief-stricken over his brother's death. Shortly after his arrival in Jefferson, he buys a powerful car, which he drives around the county with complete disregard for the safety either of himself or of others. Colonel Bayard, his grandfather, insists on riding with young Bayard wherever he goes, hoping by this tactic to force him to drive more slowly. Bayard, however, is seemingly bent on his own destruction. Forcibly borrowing a half-wild stallion, he rides it through the streets of Jefferson until the animal pitches him on his head on the concrete. Patched up by the doctor and told to go home, Bayard, with V. K. Suratt and another man, drives out to Frenchman's Bend where Suratt has a cache of whiskey. They pick up three Negro musicians and proceed to serenade every unmarried girl in town, including Narcissa Benbow. Bayard finally nabbed by the sheriff, spends the night in jail.

In June Bayard begins to work on the plantation and, lulled by the rhythms of the earth, becomes for a time placid and almost normal. After sowing time is over, however, he takes to racing his car again, turns it over in a creek bed and breaks several ribs. During his convalescence, Narcissa Benbow comes to read to him and manages to extract from him a promise to behave himself in the future. After a short, strange courtship, he and Narcissa are married, and by early autumn Narcissa is with child. Bayard begins to go possum-hunting with the Negroes, but Narcissa is unable to share his interest. Again pursued by his old despair, he draws further away from her and goes hunting almost daily. Finally, he runs his car over a cliff while his grandfather is riding with him, and the old man, though otherwise unhurt, dies of a heart attack. Afraid to go home and face his family, Bayard takes refuge at the MacCullum place in the northeast part of the county, where he stays for several days, finding some measure of respite in his flight from himself in the MacCallums' quiet acceptance of him.

The day before Christmas he heads north again, spending Christmas Eve in a barn and the following day with the Negro owner's poverty-stricken family. That evening he boards a train and disappears for several months, sending Miss Jenny an occasional postcard and two requests for money. Late in the spring he finds himself testing airplanes in Ohio and is killed flying a plane he knows to be unsafe. On the day of his death his son is born. The child is called John by Miss Jenny but christened Benbow by Narcissa.

Loosely linked to the Sartoris story are two subplots, one dealing with Narcissa's brother Horace Benbow and Belle Mitchell, the other with Narcissa and Byron Snopes, a clerk in the Sartoris bank. Horace, also just home from the war, becomes entangled with Belle Mitchell, a married woman with a young daughter, and consequently estranged from Narcissa, who despises Belle as having a 'backstairs

nature.' Narcissa, meanwhile, has been the object of anonymous and obscene letters from Byron Snopes. Though advised by Miss Jenny to give them to the proper authorities so that their writer can be tracked down, Narcissa hides the letters. Just before her wedding, Snopes breaks into her room and steals the letters, then robs the bank and flees to Mexico.

The action of *Sartoris* is contained within the time between Bayard's return from the war and his death a year later; however, the book is not so much about any one Sartoris as it is about the mythos of the entire family, the legend, history, and tradition associated with the name. The very name Sartoris has in it not only a 'glamorous fatality' but an obligation to its owner to live up to its traditions, to embody the ideas and ideals—courage, honor, foolhardiness, and glorious, violent death—of previous Sartorises. The opening of the novel emphasizes the extent to which the family is dominated by the past glory of its first representative in Jefferson, Colonel John Sartoris. Dead and freed 'of time and flesh' he is a 'far more palpable presence' than either his son, Colonel Bayard, or his old friend, Will Falls. The dead Colonel Sartoris is lifted in legend above the limitations and failings of life, and the legend of the past overshadows the more pallid actuality of the present.

The repetition of the names John and Bayard serve to emphasize the influence of dead Sartorises upon living ones. The first Bayard, called by Faulkner more of a nuisance than a black sheep, met his death at the hands of a frightened cook while gallantly abducting a can of anchovies from the Yankees—yet this 'hare-brained prank' became the stuff out of which a legend of devil-may-care bravery and high spirits was woven for the edification of future Sartorises. Three generations later, Johnny Sartoris appears as a kind of reincarnation of the Civil War Bayard, complete with dangerous pranks and early death in war.

The twentieth-century Bayard is less an individual than a representative Sartoris who is unable to reconcile his tradition with the world in which he lives—his sense of having to act like a Sartoris with whatever little apprehension of individuality he has. The most obvious characteristic of Bayard is his overwhelming death wish, and this in turn is related to his inability to love, his irresponsibility, his total selfishness, and his isolation. His desire for death probably stems largely from his grief at his twin's death and guilt for his own failure to prevent that death, as well as guilt for simply being alive while Johnny is dead. More important, however, is his conviction, instilled from birth, that he is obliged to live and die according to the Sartoris tradition. Subconsciously unwilling to be forced into the Sartoris pattern, Bayard abjures all responsibility and sets about doing away with the life that he is unable to accept. His destruction is both a punishment of the Sartorises for demanding that he conform to the family pattern, and, ironically, a characteristic Sartoris impulsive and violent end.

Interwoven with the story of Bayard's search for death are the remembered scenes of past times now become legend—the first Bayard's exploits with Jeb Stuart, Colonel John Sartoris' coolheaded escape from the pursuing Yankees and his accidental and almost singlehanded capture of a Yankee camp—and the contrasting activities of characters in the periphery of Bayard's existence. Bayard's own character is more clearly defined by the implied comparison with both Horace Benbow, son of a Jefferson family of lawyers and judges, and Buddy MacCallum, youngest son of a hill man in the northeast part of the county. Like Bayard, Horace and Buddy have just returned from the war and are faced, in their own spheres, with the difficulty of readjusting to life in rural Mississippi. Buddy goes back to an uncomplex and wholesome existence close to the land.

Horace, though he finds life more complicated and human relationships more painful, is able to discover something of value in the small, almost perfect vases he makes with the glass-blowing set he brought back from Venice. Though he becomes a lawyer only out of loyalty to the family tradition, he gives in to the tradition gracefully and does his rather inadequate best. Unlike Bayard, he is reconciled to living in the mold cast for him by others, and is a man who loves words and thoughts, rather than action. Though Horace when he acts at all is conscious of the absurdity of the part he is playing, he still attempts to give direction to his life, whereas Bayard's actions are only noisily and childishly destructive.

Also contrasted to Bayard is Narcissa Benbow. It seems that she loves as well as hates him because he is able to disturb the otherwise unbroken calm of her existence. It is possible that Bayard marries her in the hope that her serenity will somehow be transferred to him. But Narcissa's beautiful tranquility is a result of

her total self-absorption, and she and Bayard remain spiritually as isolated as ever. Narcissa is, in many ways, the absolute antithesis of Bayard: whereas he is frantically fleeing from himself, she is immerses in herself. She strives to appear to be what others believe her to be—gentle, demure, above all ‘respectable,’ almost inviolate. Yet she secretly keeps the anonymous letters, perhaps partially because she cannot, as she says, bear to have people know that a man thought such things about her, but also for the secret pleasure she gains from having them.

Although Colonel John Sartoris embodies the swashbuckling and the glory of the Sartoris tradition, it is Miss Jenny who represents all that is most genuinely valuable. Strong, sensible, and eminently capable, she is able to reflect the best qualities of bygone days without living in the past or letting the past dominate the present. Yet Sartoris values, like the Sartorises themselves, are dying out in the modern world. No young woman in Jefferson in 1919—certainly not Narcissa or Belle—shows any sign of developing into a woman of Miss Jenny’s stature.

Faulkner seems to be suggesting that the traditions of the Old South, although maintained in theory after the Civil War and Reconstruction, were almost completely moribund by the end of the First World War, and were being replaced by the new morality of a mechanized civilization, one based on shrewdness rather than honor and gall rather than courage. This is suggested, but not delineated, in *Sartoris* by the presence of the Snopeses, a multitudinous family of vicious, cunning, animallike ‘red-necks’ whose infiltration of Frenchman’s Bend and Jefferson is related in *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*. Sartoris decline is accompanied by a rise in Snopes fortunes, so that, in 1919, Colonel Bayard Sartoris and Flem Snopes are president and vice-president of the same bank. But if the modern world is out of joint, it is at least partially because Sartoris values, though ‘better’ than Snopes values, have somehow failed.

It is frequently assumed that the Sartoris tradition represents all that was good of ante-bellum society, that the past actions of the dead Sartorises overshadow those of the living because the deeds of the dead were morally good insofar as they were in accord with the accepted code of Southern society whereas the acts of the living (particularly of young Bayard) stem from no coherent moral code whatsoever. To a limited degree, this assumption is true; certainly the younger characters—Bayard, Narcissa, Horace, and even to a degree Buddy MacCallum—are all more or less rootless. The traditions of their forebears are almost useless to them in the postwar world, and they themselves are completely incapable of formulating new traditions through which they can cope with their experience. As a result, each clings to a part of his past—Bayard to Sartoris violence, Narcissa to the appearance of virtue, and Horace to a blind belief in goodness—which has been falsified and emptied of significance in being separated from the tradition out of which it grew.

However, this is not to say that the morality of the Old South, the Sartoris tradition, is necessarily the best of all possible traditions. In the first place, it is death-oriented, looking to the past rather than the present or the future. Secondly, it is static; rather than evolving with time and change, fitting itself to the ever-renewing present and being remolded by the best of each generation, it became fixed at the end of the Civil War. Being static, it must, in order to survive, shape its inheritors to its lineaments, morally—and frequently physically—destroying them as individuals. Thus, regardless of the fact that the Sartoris tradition upheld honor, dignity, courage, and loyalty to one’s own, in fact it offered nothing but death to every Sartoris bound by it. Only one, Colonel Bayard, refused to be shaped by it (Faulkner tells this story in ‘An Odor of Verbena’ in *The Unvanquished*). It is significant, in view of this, that Colonel Bayard’s death was considered by Miss Jenny to be a flouting of them all.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 16-21

Michael Hollister (2015)