

ANALYSIS

“An Odor of Verbena” (1938)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

I

Verbena symbolized honor in ancient Greece. Sacred boughs of laurel, olive and myrtle were carried by priests and heralds and sprigs woven into garlands crowned the heads of heroes and poets. Bayard Sartoris is a college law student in Mississippi boarding with his professor, Judge Wilkins, in about 1874. The South is still trying to rise from the ruins of the Civil War. One evening his studies are interrupted when the Judge bursts violently into his room in violation of decorum. The last sentence of the opening paragraph is characteristic Faulkner rhetoric dramatizing intense emotion through abstract language in his Expressionistic high style: “Then he flung the door violently inward against the doorstep with one of those gestures with or by which an almost painfully unflagging preceptory of youth ultimately aberrates, and stood there saying, ‘Bayard. Bayard, my son, my dear son’.”

Wilkins is not merely his professor of law teaching him established precepts, he is a Judge representing the whole society. He is an institution, a “preceptory.” In the Middle Ages a *preceptory* was a house or community of knights, who personified and defended precepts and ideals. Wilkins houses Bayard, then sends him out like a knight to kill for honor. Bayard was the name of a famous French knight, identifying the young Bayard Sartoris with a long tradition of upholding a code of honor. Wilkins is a disciplined and diligent mentor, “almost painfully unflagging,” until all of a sudden this evening he “aberrates”—he deviates “violently.” Bayard is the son of Colonel John Sartoris, an exemplar of honor in the aristocratic Old South before the Civil War. The prototype of Sartoris was Faulkner’s great-grandfather, Colonel William Falkner, who organized and for awhile commanded the Second Mississippi Infantry, built the first railroad in his region, wrote several books including a novel, and was killed in a duel.

In calling Bayard son, Judge Wilkins is identified with and is speaking for John Sartoris using words that echo the familiar Bible story of Absalom and evoke the perspective of Thomas Sutpen, who is responsible for the tragic lives of both his sons in *Absalom, Absalom!* Judge Wilkins even hands Bayard his cloak and hat in bustling him out the door to go and do his duty. “He was trying to find the words with which to offer me his pistol too.” As usual Faulkner reveals pertinent information gradually, requiring us to infer what is going on—and often also when and who is who—compelling us on with eloquence. We see that something momentous has happened, that Bayard must do something about it, and that he might not return. The frequent movement of the narrative back and forth in time relates present events to past causes, evoking the consciousness of Bayard. Plots in Faulkner often originate over half a century before the present story begins, often with the Civil War.

Bayard’s black companion Ringo is more a friend than a servant and more a man than a “boy,” as he is called even by Bayard: “Ringo had apparently flung the cook aside and come on into the house and into the library where he and Mrs. Wilkins were sitting and said without preamble... ‘They shot Colonel Sartoris this morning’.” The plural “they” blames the entire white society rather than a single man. Bayard has anticipated that his father would be killed eventually and that he would be called upon to avenge him. He honors his father and wishes he could have been with him when he got shot—stood “beside him on whatever spot, wherever it was that he would have to fall and lie in the dust and dirt.” Now the time has come and he must somehow react with honor: “I was The Sartoris.”

Mrs. Wilkins disagrees with her husband and the honor code of violence “because she was a woman and so wiser than any man, else the men would not have gone on with the War for two years after they knew they were whipped.” With similar bad judgment the Judge is now “offering me the pistol and horse in a dozen different ways.” In the Old South even for a Judge the violent code of honor triumphs the law.

Bayard has discussed with Wilkins the possibility of defying the code, since he believes in the Biblical commandment “*Thou shalt not kill.*” Now he feels like he is being forced “to deliver like by a highwayman out of the dark,” equating the Judge with a common thief who is stealing his soul—depriving him of his free will and humanity. He becomes a rebel, ironically like an old Confederate insisting on independence. He intends to “stick to principle in the face of blood and raising and background,” defying the Judge and the community, knowing he will be judged a coward.

Bayard sees this crisis as a test of his character: “*At least this will be my chance to find out if I am what I think I am or if I just hope; if I am going to do what I have taught myself is right or if I am just going to wish I were.*” One of the changes in him reflects a change in race relations after the Civil War. His “boy” Ringo is the same age but “he had outgrown me” and “I had had to do most of the changing just to catch up with him.” Bayard’s life is at stake and Ringo “had cried,” likewise transcending race. Bayard leaves with Ringo, anticipating death, followed by Judge Wilkins “still offering the horse and the pistol without speaking the words,” because he does not need to speak them.

The moon, a traditional symbol of romance, is a motif in the story introduced here as “a thin sickle of moon like the heel print of a boot in wet sand.” The image suggests that Bayard is on his way to stamp out the romanticism of the violent code, as later urged by Aunt Jenny: “No bloody moon, Bayard.” However, his pacifism itself is romantic. Though only a “sickle,” his romantic moon prefigures his own possible death—evoking the sickle or scythe of the Grim Reaper. According to custom in the violent ritual, the man who shot his father may just as readily shoot him first in self-defense, but Bayard is young and romantic enough to still have faith in his fellow man: He “would not die (I knew that) but...maybe forever after could never again hold up his head.”

Bayard and Ringo are more closely related as the story proceeds. They had slept together as children “from the time we were born until Father rebuilt the house.” Their relationship is evidence of a potential New South emerging after the Civil War, as the whole social order is “rebuilt” like the Sartoris mansion. His race has made Ringo practical and unromantic. He suggests to Bayard that instead of risking his life, the two of them should bushwhack the man who killed his father the way they did a predatory carpetbagger from the North when they were boys. “But I reckon that wouldn’t suit that white skin you walks around in.” Bayard says No and immediately thinks about verbena in Aunt Jenny’s pastoral garden, identifying honor with her and with the values of the heart, expressed in “*Thou shalt not kill.*” Wearing a pair of John Sartoris’s old cavalry gauntlets from the Civil War, Aunt Jenny working in the garden with old Joby is an image transcending conflict through nurture and love.

The moral opposite of Jenny is Drusilla, the widow of John Sartoris, named after the wicked stepsister in the romantic fairy tale *Cinderella*. Drusilla is parallel to Judge Wilkins in coercing Bayard to enact the violent ritual of death, whereas Aunt Jenny is parallel to Mrs. Wilkins in opposing it. Bayard envisions Drusilla waiting for him in the parlor at home with the corpse of his father behind her, a sprig of verbena above each ear symmetrically balanced like the two loaded pistols she holds, doubling the firepower offered him by the Judge. She is wearing a yellow ball gown, escaping violence now because she is a woman, now playing a traditional role to perpetuate the code. She rode with Colonel John Sartoris throughout the Civil War and is more capable of violence than Bayard. But now she is yellow—a coward now—because she could avenge her husband herself. Now representing wronged southern womanhood, she has become “the Greek amphora priestess of a succinct and formal violence.”

II

Bayard had walked with Drusilla in the garden of the Sartoris mansion after it got burned down in the Civil War. Aunt Jenny is the one who cultivates the family garden. “Drusilla would no more have bothered with flowers than Father.” Drusilla is puritan rather than pastoral, a rigid moralist, a masculine combative woman who in the War “had ridden in man’s clothes and with her hair cut short like any other member of Father’s troop.” She walks between “Aunt Jenny’s flower beds” wearing verbena in her hair and a dress, though she “would have worn pants all the time if Father had let her.”

Colonel John Sartoris, representing the best in the aristocratic culture of the Old South, got corrupted by the Civil War. After the war a townsman said of him, "He's had to kill too many folks, and that's bad for a man." Bayard watched his father clean his derringer and reload it after killing a man he thought might intend to rob him. The innocence of the victim is implied by an accumulation of details eliciting sympathy for him: The dead man is (1) "almost a neighbor"; (2) poor, with "a wife and several children in a dirt-floored cabin; (3) "a hill-man"—a motif in Faulkner identified with natural innocence; (4) "in the first infantry regiment when it voted Father out of command; (5) "Father had shot too quick"; (6) Sartoris sent money to the wife; and (7) the wife marched into his house while the family was at the dinner table and threw the money into his face. Ironically, it is John Sartoris himself who robs the innocent—of a human life—the victim, his wife, and their children. Confederate officers such as Sartoris killed and robbed a great many innocent people by initiating and prolonging the Civil War.

The degeneration of southern culture during the War is also indicated when the first regiment voted to replace Sartoris with Thomas Sutpen, who "was underbred, a cold ruthless man." Sutpen may have robbed steamboats before acquiring land for his plantation and was so selfish he refused to join Sartoris and other white landowners in the Ku Klux Klan "to keep the carpetbaggers from organizing the Negroes into an insurrection." Sartoris sets an example of lawless violence to his son and Bayard then goes out with Ringo and bushwhacks the carpetbagger Grumby.

There is no honor in the code anymore. When Drusilla refers to two carpetbaggers Sartoris had killed, Bayard protests: "They were men. Human beings." But to her they were less than human, "They were Northerners, foreigners who had no business here." Southerners like Drusilla were still saying this about civil rights workers who came down South to register black voters in the 1960s and got murdered. To her, "one human life or two dozen" are not worth anything. "Not anything," she emphasizes. Drusilla is built like a man, runs like a man, rides like a man, and dissociates from humanity like a man at war. She is the female counterpart of Sartoris, embodying the inhumane romanticism of the violent code: "There are worse things than killing men, Bayard. There are worse things than being killed. Sometimes I think the finest thing that can happen to a man is to love something, a woman preferably, well, hard hard hard, then to die young because he believed what he could not help but believe." Drusilla thinks the finest thing that could happen to a man would be to die for her.

The romance of killing for the honor of a lady is seductive and intoxicating to a young southerner like Bayard, though of course Drusilla is not really a lady: "She was looking at me as she never had before and—the scent of verbena in her hair seemed to have increased a hundred times, to have got a hundred times stronger." Drusilla has morphed from a cavalry trooper to a southern lady to an incestuous seductress: "Kiss me, Bayard." Of course he refuses: "No. You are Father's wife." But she insists three times, bending away from him—forcing him to come to her. Finally he embraces her and she holds his face to hers like controlling a horse. Kissing her, he thinks of her as "the symbol of the ancient and eternal Snake. Even though they are not related by blood, the incestuous aspect of this embrace is perverse. The romantic code embodied in Drusilla identifies her not with Eve in the garden but with the Snake. Coercing him with kisses, she is emasculating Bayard, reversing gender roles and reducing him to a reluctant Eve by offering herself to him like a candy apple with a rotten core. She rewards his compliance by taking a sprig of verbena from her hair and putting it in his lapel like a medal of honor.

Drusilla and Aunt Jenny both lost men in the Civil War. Drusilla only lost a fiancé, whereas Jenny lost her husband, yet she did not lose her humanity like Drusilla as a consequence. The contrast between the two women recalls the similar contrast between Brett Ashley and Catherine Barkley in Hemingway's first two novels, both of whom lost fiancés in World War I. Bayard "thought how the War had tried to stamp all the women of her generation and class in the South into a type and how it had failed." In many ways admirable, Drusilla is an "incorrigibly individual woman: not like so many men who return from wars to live on Government reservations like so many steers."

Bayard says honorably that he must inform his father about this betrayal of faith and to our surprise Drusilla says perversely, Yes, he must. Then she insists that he kiss her again. Bayard does tell his father, who has the intolerant eyes of a man who has "killed too much." But his father does not care. "It didn't even matter." Though otherwise intolerant, Sartoris is so decadent by now he is indifferent to a sexual

relationship between his wife and his son. Drusilla knew he would not care. He has become the sort of man who would prostitute his wife to facilitate a business deal. He may even have told Drusilla to seduce Bayard because he wants to use him as a lawyer.

In another ironic surprise, this section of the story ends with John Sartoris acknowledging his guilt and intending to redeem his honor: He wants to “do a little moral housecleaning. I am tired of killing men, no matter what the necessity or the end. Tomorrow, when I go to town and meet Ben Redmond, I shall be unarmed.” The Colonel must know that Redmond is likely to shoot him dead. His planning for the future using Bayard as his lawyer is as fanciful as his Confederates were in continuing to fight the War long after they had lost. In the end, Colonel Sartoris redeems himself by not killing Redmond, though it cost him his life. That is the standard of honor he set for his son.

III

Bayard and Ringo reach home in Jefferson and find George Wyatt there with other members of Colonel Sartoris’s regiment, all gathered and watching him “with that curious vulture-like formality which Southern men assume in such situations.” Wyatt tells Bayard that when his father confronted Redmond, he was armed after all--as if he changed his mind about redemption. “John had the derringer inside his cuff like always, but he never touched it, never made a move toward it.”

Wyatt’s description of how Sartoris drew and fired his derringer confirms the Colonel’s dishonorable character after the War. Sartoris would “fire the pistol from beneath his left hand almost as if he were hiding from his own vision what he was doing.” After the War he is underhanded, morally and literally, dishonest and doing harm to himself: “When he killed one of the men he shot a hole through his own coat sleeve.” Wyatt eagerly offers to take on the responsibility and pleasure of killing Redmond. Any of the men would consider it an honor: “You’re young, just a boy, you ain’t had any experience in this kind of thing.” Wyatt makes facing and killing Redmond a test of Bayard’s manhood among the men in town. Bayard is expected to live up to the example set by his father as The Sartoris.

The social pressure of Wyatt and the townsmen is added to that from seductive Drusilla in the garden. The men follow him to the mansion. “In the background for chorus Wyatt and the others stood with the unctuous formality which the Southern man assumes in the presence of death.” This chorus evokes Greek tragedy, making the determinism the men represent seem absolute, hence magnifying Bayard’s ultimate triumph of free will. At this point, however, he seems cast by Fate into playing a role from which there is no escape. On the portico as a stage, Drusilla the priestess of the ritual awaits, with the lighted door and windows of the mansion “like a theatre scene.”

Bayard postpones his performance until tomorrow. Drusilla guides him inside with a sprig of verbena above each ear and “discharging into me with a shock like electricity that dark and passionate voracity.” A vamp as voracious as a vampire, she lusts for blood with a “fierce exaltation.” Her opposite is Aunt Jenny, the sister of John Sartoris, with “the same eyes as Father’s except they were intent and very wise instead of intolerant.” Drusilla calls Bayard away from the very wise Aunt Jenny as if he is now on her leash: “Come, Bayard.” She guides him to the coffin to view the corpse of his father, for inspiration. Bayard thinks his father may have been so troubled by all the killing he had done and how he had done it that he “was glad to lay down at last.” If so, he allowed Redmond to do him a favor.

Drusilla whispers to him “with a passionate and dying fall.” And “again the scent of the verbena in her hair seemed to have increased a hundred times as she stood holding out to me, one in either hand, the two dueling pistols. ‘Take them, Bayard,’ she said, in the same tone in which she had said ‘Kiss me’ last summer—“pressing them into my hands, watching me with that passionate and voracious exaltation.” She means Take the pistols and then take me—if you survive. She has already said, however, that she thinks the “finest” thing would be for him to die for her. She calls the triggers of the pistols as “fatal as the physical shape of love.” Her exaltation in violence is orgasmic: “to be permitted to kill, to be permitted vengeance, to take into your bare hands the fire of heaven that cast down Lucifer. No; I. I gave it to you; I put it into your hands.” Drusilla usurps the power of God.

With “her hot lips and her hot hands still touching my flesh,” she kisses Bayard’s right hand holding one of the pistols. Then intuitively she senses that, nevertheless, Bayard is *not* going to do it!—“her mouth open a little and pale as one of those rubber rings women seal fruit jars with. Then her eyes filled with an expression of bitter and passionate betrayal.” She is so mortified at having kissed his hand and then been rejected, she becomes hysterical, repeating “*I kissed his hand!*” The hero is supposed to kiss the hand of the lady, not the other way around. Drusilla feels betrayed by Bayard, but she has betrayed the chivalric tradition she claims to believe in by reversing gender roles, by replacing honor with bloodlust and by trying to coerce a boy to betray himself and perhaps get killed for her satisfaction. Her perversion of the code is dramatized by her shocked realization of how much she has demeaned herself.

So intense is the scene that both Drusilla and Bayard are near vomiting, she “trying to hold it back with her hand like a small child who has filled its mouth too full.” The mature Aunt Jenny counters Drusilla: “You are not going to try to kill him. All right.... Don’t let it be Drusilla, a poor hysterical young woman. And don’t let it be him, Bayard, because he is dead now.” The Old South is dead. Bayard must find a new code, a way to react honorably without killing. “I must live with myself, you see.” Unlike the way Drusilla tried to manipulate him, Aunt Jenny “kissed me and released me, all in one motion.” By calling him son, Aunt Jenny replaces both Judge Wilkins and his father as Bayard’s exemplar.

IV

Bayard is awake all night, smelling the scent of “Drusilla’s verbena” from his coat. In the morning townspeople begin to arrive “to see what I was going to do.” Bayard does not yet know himself. He can only explain to Aunt Jenny, “You see, I want to be thought well of.” She says she would think well of him if he hid all day in the stable loft. But he is The Sartoris, he must set an example.

When he leaves for town, she is waiting for him in the hall “as Mrs. Wilkins had stood yesterday at the University. She held my hat in her hand. ‘Even if you hid all day in the stable, Bayard,’ she said.” Then she tells him about a Confederate blockade runner during the Civil War, an Englishman who became a romantic hero “to small boys or fool young women”—such as Drusilla. Actually he was not romantic at all and only risked his life for the money, like the Greek Count in *The Sun Also Rises*. The blockade runner also evokes the reductive popular stereotype of Hemingway in that “he had a vocabulary of seven words, though I must admit he got along quite well with them. The first four were, ‘I’ll have rum, thanks,’ and then, when he had the rum, he would use the other three—across the champagne, to whatever bosom or low gown: ‘No bloody moon.’ No bloody moon, Bayard.” Aunt Jenny and the blockade runner reject romance. Moonlight is romantic, but a blockade runner could be spotted in moonlight and shot. Aunt Jenny is saying to Bayard that he can be a hero without being a romantic fool.

In town, the new courthouse is a sign of the New South. Ringo is concealing a pistol inside his shirt, “probably the one we had taken from Grumby that day we killed him.” To bushwhack Redmond would be as dishonorable as Grumby was. Bayard leaves Ringo behind and “could smell nothing except the verbena in my coat, as if it had gathered all the sun, all the suspended fierce heat...so that I moved in a cloud of verbena as I might have moved in a cloud of smoke from a cigar.” Wyatt intercepts him and tries to impose a pistol on him as Judge Wilkins and Drusilla had, “then the same thing seemed to happen to him that happened to Drusilla last night when she kissed my hand—something communicated by touch straight to the simple code by which he lived, without going through the brain at all.” When he realizes that Bayard is not going to take it, Wyatt like Drusilla is outraged: “Is your name Sartoris? By God, if you don’t kill him, I’m going to.” Now we see that if Bayard hid in the stable, he would become responsible for the death of Redmond anyway because then in his stead Wyatt would kill him.

“No bloody moon,” he says to Wyatt, quoting Aunt Jenny. He goes on inside to Redmond’s office while Wyatt and the other men wait outside: “I never saw them again until afterward,” suggests that he might not die after all, at least not immediately. By giving this much away Faulkner shifts the emphasis from what happens next, as in commercial fiction, to the meaning of what is happening. Yet the suspense is undiminished. In the “fierce odor of the verbena sprig” he knocks once on the door of Redmond’s law office, then opens it. Redmond is waiting for him with a pistol on his desk beneath his hand. Bayard walks toward him. Redmond fires his pistol twice without aiming, proving himself to be a decent man who does

not deserve to die and confirming Bayard's faith in humanity. When he walks out into the square on his way out of town never to return, the crowd infers that Redmond has killed Bayard.

Wyatt and the other men go up and find Bayard sitting in Redmond's chair holding the lawyer's pistol. Wyatt is stunned by the boy's courage: "You walked in here without even a pocket knife and let him miss you twice. My God in heaven." Wyatt has to grant that "You ain't done anything to be ashamed of. I wouldn't have done it that way, myself. I'd a shot at him once, anyway." Wyatt had declared he would kill Redmond if Bayard did not. If not for Bayard's heroic example, he would never even have thought of letting Redmond live. By converting Wyatt, who represents the townsmen, Bayard has in effect disarmed the honor code: "Maybe you're right, maybe there has been enough killing in your family..." As he rides out of town with Ringo, a group of men raise their hats in tribute to Bayard.

That night again the moon is "like the rim print of a heel in wet sand." The story is an allegory of the New South purging the Old South. Drusilla, personification of the old romantic code, is gone. Bayard has driven her out. Aunt Jenny prevails: "I could still smell the flowers above the verbena in my coat." Jenny is associated with flowers in the garden, a pastoral image affirming values of the heart. With irony she says, "So you had a perfectly splendid Saturday afternoon, didn't you." She cannot help but disapprove of Bayard's romanticism—his "rim of a heel print in wet sand"—which might have gotten him killed, while at the same time she cannot help but honor him. She performs a "knighting" ceremony that validates his name: "Kneel down." She takes his face in her hands and bursts into tears contrasted with Drusilla's hysterical laughter, because she loves Bayard. Still ironic, she exclaims, "Oh, damn you Sartorises!"—ironic because Bayard has saved his soul and redeemed the family honor.

In the end even Drusilla acknowledges—though only to a limited extent—that Bayard's alternative to the violent code is honorable. She leaves only a single sprig of verbena on his pillow, not two to match the two she wore in her hair, still clinging to her own concept of honor. In contrast to Jenny, it is clear at the end that Drusilla does not care about Bayard as a person, but only as an instrument of revenge and self-satisfaction. Her sprigs of verbena are the equivalent of the men in her life: "Without looking she would pinch off a half dozen of them and they would be all of a size, almost all of a shape, as if a machine had stamped them out."

Michael Hollister (2013)