

## ANALYSIS

*A Fable* (1954)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“Under the pacifist influence of a corporal and his 12 followers in 1918, a French regiment refuses to attack the Germans, who for the same reason do not counterattack. The commander, concerned with his military record, requests that the entire regiment be executed, but the supreme French general, who knows the corporal to be his natural son and who has come to believe in the inextricable mingling of human rapacity and idealism, heads the tribunal considering the case. Wise and not without compassion, yet utterly cynical, he sees war not only as a political and economic necessity but as ‘so long ingrained in man as to have become an honorable tenet of his behavior and the national altar for his love of bloodshed and glorious sacrifice. Having been warned of the pacifist plan by a betrayer among the corporal’s 12 men, he collaborates with the German command to resume the war on the continued bases of national hatred and narrow idealism for the armies and people, and an disillusioned yet god-like way of life for the aristocracy of senior officers.

Discovering this deception, a young British flyer commits suicide. A British runner is convinced by the corporal’s example that soldiers can end war if they simply throw down their weapons and meet between the lines, and having persuaded a handful of men to follow him, he is horribly injured when artillery on both sides shell the peacemakers. Also killed in this barrage are a taciturn British sentry and a black lay preacher, whose remarkable adventure in America with a superb, stolen racehorse is a long interpolated tale. As the local populace turns against the corporal, fearing that the whole regiment will be shot because of him, a reenactment of the Passion of Christ develops and becomes ramified.

Wed to a woman named Magda, and already betrayed, the corporal is denied by the betrayer as he conducts a ‘last supper’ in prison, and then is taken by the old general to a hilltop fortress to be tempted with life at the expense of his exalted hope for man’s repudiation of war and urged to abandon ‘that aberrant and futile dream’ that man...will prevail.’ Unrelenting, the corporal is shot along with two criminals and given surreptitious but decent burial. But the resumption of war, in the form of an explosion near the grave, ‘resurrects’ him, and through a combination of chance and the greed of men assigned to get the body of an unknown soldier, he is entombed beneath the everlasting flame in Paris.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 237

“Mr. William Faulkner has been working on this novel—if that is what it is—for the last nine years and it is, appropriately, a work of ambitious theme and dimension. It has the diffused glow of affirmation that writers of talent seem bound to hanker after sooner or later.... He has been called...bardic, a worker in legend and saga, and although he has been a good deal compared with Hawthorne in American literature, he will suggest to an English critic an even greater resemblance to Scott.... He has the myth-maker’s sense of the different ways in which experience is repetitive.... In *A Fable* he moves from the native past of Yoknapatawpha to history on a larger scale. He goes to the Europe of 1916 which, as we know, so profoundly affected the writers of his generation....

The tragedy of the First World War lay in the conjunction of mass slaughter with the feeling of meaninglessness. The war was felt to be an outrage committed inexplicably against each human person. This could not be said or felt of the Second World War and it cannot be said of the warlike state of the world today, for our wars are revolutionary and revolutions have meaning.... And mutiny is Mr. Faulkner’s subject. The truly symbolic figure of our time is the traitor or divided man, not the mutineer; it is Judas not Christ. *A Fable* is a fantasy natural to a past dispensation. The novel ends, with unconscious literary

'placing' in the now barren ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe before the tomb of the unknown soldier. One might say that the 1914 war was the final gift of European culture to America....

When the book opens we are in the penultimate phase of the 1914 war. Hardly any Americans have arrived. There is a mutiny in the French army. It is a protest on the part of the ordinary human being against the terror and misery of the trenches. Why not make a simple act of will and just refuse to go on? The mutiny is seen as a tumor, a mystery which has, as it turns out, been fomented by a corporal from the Middle East who has acquired French nationality and who has twelve secretive assistants, one of whom eventually betrays him. The story opens wonderfully with the arrival of the arrested men at Headquarters. Presently the disgraced general in command hands over his sword and the disaffected regiment is unloaded into a prison camp. They will be shot.

The population is divided between its own desire for peace and its anger at the rebellion. In the meantime there is a false peace and the Germans have been contacted. Another regiment (I believe I am right in saying one can never be sure of one's facts after reading Mr. Faulkner), setting out to emulate the doctrine of non-resistance, is shot up by its own guns. Mr. Faulkner's business is to take the situation at all levels, though not in the rule of thumb manner of realism, and to explore the conflict between the moral claims of war as an exorable but pitying institution and the anguish of man, to put man's need of hierarchy against the heart, to set Saint Paul against Christ.

The crisis of the allegory lies in the interviews of the Supreme Commander with some of the prisoners, but above all with the leader. The analogy with Christian myth is covertly insinuated: the leader is, in fact, the bastard son of the once dissolute and immensely wise Supreme Commander, who is admirably drawn; he tempts the son with freedom, with the arguments of Saint Paul, but finding him obdurate, leaves him to be shot. By an odd chance he falls dead, with two others, still tied to the post of the execution yard and with a crown of barbed wire on his head. It is a crucifixion. By accident or design he is identified with the unknown soldier, a symbol of the will of man in his solitude to prevail.

There is no doubt that Mr. Faulkner's supreme gift is the creation of atmospheres of one kind or another... The moral Faulkner of *A Fable* represents the sort of accomplished retreat one notices, say, in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. In the novels of his generation, like *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*, which have influenced Faulkner (novels which had worked back through the chaos of the mind's associations toward archetypal myth), the human representative figures, like Mr. and Mrs. Bloom for example, have been more powerful than their myth. Mr. Faulkner's are weaker. But his richness of texture is still there and, above all, there is that capacity for passion which—combining, as it does, with literary artificialities—gives him his intensity, his thwarted power, and his integrity as an artist.... He has been a writer divided between idiosyncrasies of regional genius and a nostalgia for a contemporary means of dealing with a universal subject. The division is still apparent in the rather leaden majesty of this allegory where a universal subject has been treated as the compendium of a word-drunk mind."

V. S. Pritchett  
"Time Frozen: *A Fable*"  
*Partisan Review* XXI 5  
(September-October 1954) 557-61

"That he has failed to find adequate incidents...and symbols to realize it dramatically and poetically is a conviction that grows steadily and painfully upon the reader; that he has been struggling—for the book cannot be taken as other than an effort at something like a social, a theological, a philosophical novel—is quite as evident. On the terms it sets for itself, the book demands to be judged not merely against the background of the author's own work, nor that of the current American novel, but by comparison with such awesomely mentionable names as Melville, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Mann....

In seeking a larger scene, Faulkner has gone back to the only setting besides Mississippi which has deeply involved him before: the First World War. The central fable is the mutiny of a French regiment on the Western front in May, 1918. Three thousand men refuse to make an attack whose purpose is shadowy even to its commanding general, but lay down their weapons. The Germans refuse to counter-attack, and the war is stalled. The Allied generals, frightened by the prospect of peace and their own unemployment,

communicate with the German command, which sends over by plane, through a fake barrage of blank anti-aircraft shells, one of its generals to negotiate the resumption of hostilities. The agitation spreads: a British and a German battalion lay down their arms, but on leaving the trenches are cut down by shells. The generals on both sides have got matters under control, and the war goes on.

True to the title of the book, Faulkner is not bothered by realistic canons of probability. The military implausibility of this main incident is exceeded by the garishness of the sub-plots. The Messiah who incites the mutiny is revealed later to be the natural son of the Allied generalissimo, and was born in a stable thirty-three years ago to a Balkan peasant woman. As a young man, he has found his way to France, married a Marseille whore (recipient of the bread in the opening scene), and become a corporal in the French army. The mutiny has been prepared by agitation within the Allied ranks and by mysterious absences of the corporal and his squad of twelve behind the German lines; their activity has been an open secret among the enlisted men, and wholly concealed from the officers.

The second mutiny is carried out with the connivance of an elderly American Negro, groom and lay preacher, who bobs up fantastically in France and is given rare honors and privileges.... He persuades the British battalion to mutiny by giving them the sign of the Masonic order into which they have been 'initiated' by the preacher's former associate in felony, a cockney groom who is now a private in the front lines and money-lender to the battalion. We are given a long and rhapsodic cut-back to a pre-war incident, the theft of a crippled champion race horse by the two grooms, who save him from the stud and dodge Federal marshals for months, winning quarter races with him throughout the South.... Faulkner summons to the telling of this secondary fable of profane love such warmth and lyricism that it makes his primary story of Christian agape seem cold and tenuous by contrast. The taking of the horse, we are told with hyperbole, was 'not a theft, but a passion, an immolation, an apotheosis.' In consequence, it may seem that Faulkner makes love for horse more vivid than love for man.

He also renders the motivation of the two grooms more convincing than that of the corporal-Messiah, who is scarcely individualized than the beam of white light by which Christ is represented on stage and screen; in fact, we are left room to take the corporal to be animated quite as much by an Oedipus complex as by dedication to the Kingdom of Heaven. The allegory of the Passion Week is carried out with minute detail. Among the Thirteen are a Judas and a Peter (named Pierre). The corporal's entourage includes, besides his Magdalen, a Marya and a Marthe. There is a Last Supper, and a Temptation of the corporal by his father, the generalissimo, who offers him not only life and liberty but the world. The Messiah is shot lashed to a post between two robbers, and his head is crowned with barbed wire. There is a densely ironic Resurrection when the traitor's body is exhumed and reburied beneath the Arc de Triomphe as the Unknown Soldier. These are only a few of the correspondences with the Gospel story, many of which are more veiled.

However labored the retelling of the Christ story, the book leaves no doubt that Faulkner's possession by it is profound and shaking. The precise nature of his religious commitment is less easy to determine. His Christianity is not of a conventional sort, though without doubt it will be both welcomed as such and repudiated as a 'failure of nerve'; nor is it an orthodox one, though it has much in common with certain types of neo-orthodox and existential theology.... Faulkner's is most likely a humanistic—or, more accurately, a non-supernaturalistic—rendering of the Christian symbolism, and it offers no theodicy and no other-worldly beatitude.... It is possible to take the corporal's subsequent apotheosis as the Unknown Soldier to be a forecast of the victory of Christ over Caesar; the incident has too much irony, however, for us to be happy about such a construction: the undying flame beneath the Arc de Triomphe after all communicates devotion to country and therefore, in terms of Faulknerian Christianity, to Caesar.

Nor, I believe, can we simply take the generalissimo to be the devil or the devil's advocate and treat the scene as the equivalent of the Grand Inquisitor section of *The Brothers Karamazov*, though the partial correspondence is obvious. Against this interpretation obtrudes not only the fact that it is the marshal who voices, even though for radically different reasons, the author's belief that man will not merely endure but prevail, but also the fact that he is the Messiah's father, and consequently stands to him in the relation of the first person of the Trinity, however much we must depart from the orthodox conceptions of this. The puzzle is heightened by the difference between the passage in the novel and the affirmation in the Nobel

Prize speech. The former says that man will prevail because of his magnificent pride and folly; the latter says he will prevail because of his compassion and sacrifice (endurance is comprised in both versions).

To try to resolve this puzzle would get us into theological and moral questions which Faulkner himself steers clear of and probably has never confronted in abstract terms. One way out would be to construe the ending as a monstrous irony and nothing more: a forecast of the defeat of Christian virtues and even a repudiation of them. Another way, which would also account for the fusion of God and Satan in the ambivalent person of the generalissimo, would take the heretical tack—in Faulkner's case we cannot rule out the likelihood of some kind of heresy—that the New Covenant has not fulfilled and superceded the Old but inverted it; in which case Faulkner would be leaving open the Nietzschean possibility that a second transvaluation of values is called for. Still a third choice would be that of Barthian neo-orthodoxy: the victory of Christ over Caesar is purely otherworldly and not even a partial redemption of man in time and history. None of these solutions fits the novel.

From a European writer of Faulkner's stature we would expect in the treatment of such a theme, even if no answer, at least a sharper and richer debate in contemporary theological and philosophical terms than Faulkner gives us: there is a considerable amount of debate in the book, but it tapers off into nebulous language.... Faulkner's explicit handling of ideas, outside as well as within the domain of theology, is usually amateurish. When, for example, as happens repeatedly in the novel, a cause is assigned to the war, it is the familiar simplification current in the 1920's: that it was an international conspiracy of the munitions makers and the generals. The generalissimo could, speaking in character, have introduced some needed complications, but he does not do so....

When Faulkner leaves the microcosm of Yoknapatawpha for the great world of contemporary society, he maintains the same attitudes at whatever cost of oversimplification. The suffering servant is now the common soldier or the European peasant; the man of deathless folly is the army flyer, the stunt pilot or the professional military leader....the aesthetic vision, of a high romantic mold, struggles to some kind of victory over the moral: the meek may inherit the earth, but the 'aristocratic' virtues, however tarnished, hold the allegiance of the novelist.

Even though *A Fable* is an eccentric and dreamlike commentary on modern society, and artistically unachieved, it at times commands partial respect by the heat of the vision and the depth of the concern. It is brave in these days to have persisted in seeking some kind of faith in man. But for evidence of Faulkner's mastery we must return to those books in which his troubled spiritual questings had not burst the bounds of his resources. In this book only those sections are convincing that, like the episode of the racehorse and the doings of the airmen, are deeply imbued by the author's experience and encompassed by his intellect."

Philip Blair Rice  
"Faulkner's Crucifixion"  
*The Kenyon Review*  
(Autumn 1954) 661-70

"This is, indeed, the focal point of *A Fable*, summing up...the whole history of human effort and achievement and finding it all rooted in rapacity: trade, government, war, art, Christianity, all of civilization. It is against this tremendous edifice of human endeavor that the Corporal, the Christ figure of the *Fable*, is juxtaposed in his great passive act of refusing to fight. He is representative of the mass of unambitious, silent people, who have no stake in any of it, and only 'endure.' Christ in Faulkner's vision is the 'mere meek heir to earth,' who, 'with his humility and pity and sacrifice,' has not even converted the world to Christianity; 'It was pagan and bloody Rome that did it'; and his modern reincarnation, the Corporal, is one of Faulkner's tragic heroes who, as Malraux has said, stand up against the irremediable and are crushed by it. He does not save anybody. He is the hero in his role as opponent of civilization.

So far it seems that readers and reviewers of *A Fable* have been saved from the shock of recognizing the ferocity of Faulkner's vision because they have approached it with the traditional interpretation of the Bible, adapting the novel to it. The truth is that it is absolute heresy. The same shock is due to all who adhere to the idea of civilization as the accumulated result of the best human efforts, which is perhaps

somewhat in danger of becoming corrupted or of exercising a corrupting influence on innocent virtue. But Faulkner's view is a far cry from Rousseau's petulant argument that civilization corrupts virtue and morals; it is a wholesale indictment of civilization as rapacious, seeing its best fruits precisely a sublimation of this, its innermost nature.... The first American proponent of this feeling was James Fenimore Cooper... It is, of course, Leatherstocking and his friends who are the spokesmen of this philosophy."

Ursula Brumm  
"Wilderness and Civilization: A Note on William Faulkner"  
*Partisan Review* (Summer 1955) 340-50

"Faulkner's intention—and his triumph—is utterly unlike Dostoevski's because he attempts to cut below the question of God's existence to a question which for many modern human beings, is prior, the root conception of Man.... Faulkner's very different intention is to establish man as worthy of devotion, belief, and love, whatever his misdeeds and failings, and whether of not he is God's creature."

Delmore Schwartz  
*Perspectives, USA* (1955)

"The source of the difficulties lies in the associations made between Christ and the character, the corporal. Because of the many superficial resemblances drawn between the two, the corporal by implication becomes an interpretation of Christ... [The parallel] perversely attributes a gnostic or manichean outlook to Christ and at the same time an incarnational outlook to the Church."

Ernest Sandeen  
(Catholic critic)  
*Review of Politics* (January 1956)

"*A Fable* (1954) is radically different from anything else Faulkner has written, and was long awaited as the climactic achievement of his career. Upon its publication in 1954 it was revealed to be a long and technically difficult parable of humanity and war, the most idealistic of Faulkner's novels but in some way the most unsatisfactory. The plot is so complicated as to defy synopsis. The setting is the First World War, and the story is built around the actual incident of the 'false armistice' of May, 1918, and the folk-legend of the appearance of a Christ-like figure in the trenches who came to bring peace to the battle-weary armies. In Faulkner's novel the Christ-figure is an anonymous French corporal whose career clearly parallels that of the Passion: he has twelve disciples, one of whom, his friend Polchek, betrays him and later commits suicide; two women who follow him are named Marthe and Marya (Mary); he is executed between two criminals, his body is taken by his women to a farm where it is blown up (i.e., the Ascension) by a chance shell, and he is later chosen by a series of coincidences as the Unknown Soldier whose remains are interred at the foot of the Arch of Triumph.

Behind his story lies the mysterious organization known as *Les Amis Myriades et Anonymes a la France de Tout le Monde* with its saint-like leader, the American Negro Reverend Tobe Sutterfield. A long digression, adapted from Southern folklore, tells the story of an English horse-trainer and two Negroes who travel around the South winning horse-races with a stolen thoroughbred. Another important sub-plot concerns the French division commander General Gragnon, whose career is ruined when an entire regiment, under the influence of the Christ-like corporal, mutinies when it is ordered to attack and thus precipitates the false armistice. The most interesting narrative passages of the novel, however, are those dealing with a young British aviator (called only 'David'), eager to get into combat, who arrives in France just in time for the mutiny and the false armistice. His sole combat sortie is a weird mission to escort a German general behind the Allied lines to confer with the Allied high command over the crisis caused by the mutiny (i.e., the militarists, the generals, band together regardless of nationality against the 'men of good will' when a dangerous pacifistic movement arises).

David, who does not understand the significance of the mission, gradually becomes aware of a vast and mysterious plan contrived to effect the meeting: the guns in his own plane have been loaded with blank ammunition, and both the German and Allied anti-aircraft guns have secretly been provided with dud shells

so that the planes may cross the lines unscathed. Later in the novel, David, fearing he has joined the war too late to take part in combat, falls into despair and presumably commits suicide.

In many ways *A Fable* is the weakest of Faulkner's major works; its various plots are poorly coordinated, much space is given to incidents which are not relevant to the central theme, and the whole novel suffers from a kind of vague and maundering spuriousness. Much of the difficulty is due to the fact that Faulkner has abandoned his Mississippi material, where he is thoroughly at home, to deal with Europe, which he visited only once, and the First World War, which he saw only from America and Canada. In support of this view it might be argued that the best parts of the book are those closest to Faulkner's own experience: the story of the stolen horse, a tale something like those related in *The Hamlet*, and the parts dealing with flying, drawn from Faulkner's own service as a Canadian air cadet.

The main ideas of the novel are expressed in a long dialogue between the corporal and the Allied commander-in-chief. The passage is evidently modeled on the famous 'Grand Inquisitor' chapter from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*; the general, like the Grand Inquisitor, argues that mankind must be cynically manipulated for its own good, and the corporal, like Dostoyevsky's Christ, holds fast to his faith in man's essential goodness and wisdom."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 223-24

"In the interest of universality, he restates abstractly most of the ideas developed in dramatic fashion in his preceding novels.... What is important is not what took place at Verdun or Valaumont but the fact of war. This blurring of the historical outline by fusing the realistic present with the mythic past points up the essential unity of human experience. The characters therefore belong simultaneously to the historical world of the drama and the timeless world of the fable.

The quest for freedom is presented on three different levels. The first and archetypal quest is Christ's, which is primarily religious and divine. For the Christ whose life is paralleled in the Corporal's is essentially the rebel, pitting his own personal faith in God and man against the authority of the church and its traditions. The Corporal's quest, on the other hand, despite the suggestions of the supernatural, is purely human and moral.... Finally, the groom and his two Negro companions engage in a quest for physical freedom on the natural level through their frantic efforts to keep the magnificent lame horse out of the hands of its owner.... Appropriately, the horse, which is a symbol of natural freedom, is maimed and its liberty is contingent upon the evasion of various groups of men dedicated to its capture....

In contrast to the Groom's quest for physical freedom, which is presented as a simple flight from the law, the Corporal's quest is rendered extremely complex by virtue of his relationship with the Marshal.... This opposition is worked out in various contexts, but in all of them the Marshal represents the voice of authority and power, the Corporal that of individual freedom and love. In terms of their personal relationship, the Marshal is the father, traditionally a symbol of authority.... The spiritual quest for freedom of the individual is forever being transformed into collective dogma and order into regimentation. Regarded in this light, the Marshal and the Corporal are both archetypal figures, exemplifying a pattern that is eternally present—an irresolvable tension that is the essence of man's history and a condition of his future....

Obviously it is to the living Christ that the Corporal is related, a fact borne out by the repetition in his own life of the events of the Passion Week and by the nature of his mission. The Marshal, on the other hand, is the defender of the church and its dogmas if only because it is part of the established order. In his concern to defend and preserve the institutions of religion, he becomes a mock savior, deified and venerated by his people.... The Marshal and the Corporal are related respectively to the Old and the New Testaments and to the prophecies of the savior as a Warrior King and as the Prince of Peace....

It is simply as a man that the Corporal succeeds in reminding some few others of their humanity, leading them to recognize their moral nature and to accept the responsibility for ethical decisions. In the process codes and traditions lose their sacrosanct quality. The filial obligation to conform and preserve is

countered with the individual's duty to judge and, where necessary, to alter. The implications of this are enormous: if the power to effect changes is man's, then the future is not longer predetermined by the past.... When people are denied choice and make no protest, the result is a closed society in which ethics are replaced by a code backed by both authority and tradition. As defender and savior of this society, the Marshal has almost unlimited power which is again challenged by the Corporal in his role as a soldier.... The military categories of officers, men, and civilians constitute an equivalent to the South's classification based on an economy of plantation owners, slaves, and poor whites. In both cases, men find themselves in mutually exclusive groups, each with a particular code binding on its members and determining their behavior both within the group and with respect to other groups....

Altruism whose object is the abstraction, the nation or state, is the gesture of the citizen bound by his code, not of man freely expressing his moral nature. And when the nation or the state converts man into a citizen, it also succeeds in destroying or at least atrophying his moral sense.... The mutiny compels the Marshal to take emergency measures which reveal the true nature of authority and of that complex structure of institutions and ideas which it supports. The meeting of the Allied generals with the German commander provides that moment of shock, found in almost all of Faulkner's novels, which drives various characters to re-examine themselves and their shibboleths....

It is the Corporal who, like Christ, reveals through his own life the way and the truth. In contrast to the Marshal, the temporal hero-savior, he is associated not with the city and the desert but with the fruitful land.... By his example, the Corporal conveys the fact that heroism need not consist of shouldering a gun and marching off to battle, that there is a moral as well as a physical courage, and that loyalty and self-sacrifice need not be linked with the nation and its ideologies.... The Corporal is more interested in the nature of man's endurance and the form of his prevailing than in the fact of survival itself....

In short, no matter what the level, personal, religious, or social, the relationship between the Marshal and the Corporal indicates the continuing necessity of protest. And this is always the task of the individual since the majority of men, concerned with safety and security, actively fear and distrust personal liberty. But there are the ten who accompany the Corporal into prison and who serve as witnesses to as well as symbols of faith and hope. To these ten might be added the old Quartermaster General, shaken by his loss of faith in the Marshal and appalled by his own guilt, weeping over the battered body of the Runner whose laughter is a triumphant affirmation of the spirit of resistance. Representing various nations and ranks, these men offer a composite picture of man becoming aware of his servitude, proclaiming his freedom and his humanity....

This, however, is an ideal—nothing less than the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth—and as an ideal, it is always out of reach. In the meantime the conflict between society and the individual, authority and freedom, dogma and faith, is both inevitable and necessary, for it is by virtue of that conflict that the moral nature of both man and society is recognized. Hence, the resolution of the struggle between the Marshal and the Corporal on the personal level merely effects its continuance on the general level. The Marshal's victory is in reality a defeat, for the death of the Corporal is a triumphant affirmation of that principle which the Marshal had sought to destroy by tempting the Corporal to save his life.... If the Corporal is need that [Unknown] soldier, then the flame becomes a symbol of the individual's love, faith, and freedom preserving itself in the very heart of that shrine dedicated to the army, the nation, and its heroes."

Olga W. Vickery  
*The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*  
(Louisiana State 1959, 1964) 209-27

"One of the major questions raised in the 1950's had to do with the degree and nature of Faulkner's commitment to Christian morality. He had...been satisfied to say that his belief in man's endurance is *like* a belief in God. And surely the elaborate parallels of *A Fable* suggested at the most a secularized Christ story, a Christ reduced to the level of humanist suffering and parable.... [Hyatt] Waggoner warned against the temptation to accept Faulkner as entirely within the Christian fold; but he ends by almost making an Anglican cleric of him.... Faulkner belongs to the 'conservative' party in American literature—Hawthorne,

Melville, and Eliot—in his emphasis upon the consequences of human evil, as opposed to the denial of it in Emerson....

While he had stressed so heavily the moral intention of his work, he had also placed its implications of doctrine within reach of a Christian interpretation. Faulkner's approach to Christianity was akin to that of a purist who hates and despises the forms that vitiate the spirit. Two aspects of recent Faulkner criticism draw from this feature of his meditation: discussions of his attack upon Southern (as well as imported Northern) Calvinism, and critical attempts to make whole sense of his apparent flirtations with the Christ symbol.... His work is 'steeped in Calvinism,' which is not to say that it is Calvinist, but intensely outraged by the tendency of man to honor the form of observance and neglect the spirit.... Some attempts have been made to consider Faulkner and Hawthorne as in one tradition....

Mrs. [Dusoir] Lind remarks upon 'the irony that Christmas, martyred by the austerity of a faith rooted in the Old Testament, becomes a symbol of the suffering endured by Christ in the New'.... The Christ story is an archetype of man's will to be divine or to perfect in himself both the passive and the active virtues. The variety of suggestive notations in Faulkner's work of the Christ parallel (at times both whimsical and obsessive) has set his critics to elaborate searches and extravagant claims. It appears on occasion as though Faulkner had been playing a game of identification with them.... His obscurity is of two kinds: that which reveals the tensions and contradictions of the situation itself...and that which comes from his forcing his language into high-sounding but basically unclear generalities and his fiction into allegory....

Other critics called attention to the 'medieval' formality of the novel's intellectual design. Roma A. King called it 'a modern morality closer in concept to the medieval *Everyman* than to the modern realistic novel.... It may be that, as Dayton Kohler suggests (*College English*, May, 1955), 'Faulkner's treatment of Hebraic-Christian myth is like Joyce's use of the Homeric story in *Ulysses* and Mann's adaptation of Faustian legend in *Doctor Faustus*.' But there is some doubt that the literary responsibilities of the older to the modern text in these other two cases are nearly so exacting, nor is the hero of either so necessarily [sic] linked to doctrinal demands.

*A Fable* did not lack for whole-hearted critical endorsement. The immensity of the problematic and polemical circumstance seemed in these cases to overcome any indisposition to accept its rhetorical quality. Delmore Schwartz (*Perspectives, USA*, 1955) called the novel 'a masterpiece, a unique fulfillment of Faulkner's genius which gives a luminous new meaning to his work as a whole.... Consulting *The Brothers Karamazov* for comparison's sake, Schwartz affirmed the moral superiority of the Corporal over Ivan.... Heinrich Straumann (*Anglia*, 1955), wholly committed to admiration of *A Fable*, did not trouble himself with the outcome but rather measured the quality of the conflict itself. *A Fable* is 'a milepost in the history of American literature,' a classic Anglo-Saxon equivalent of *War and Peace*."

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction (1960)  
*William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*  
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery  
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 32-35, 37, 39-41

"Meant as an affirmation of man's powers and capacities, it never resolves the contradiction between its high-minded positives and the bleak implications of a 'reenactment' of the passion. Inviting consideration as a fable, it lumbers through a maze of Faulknerian plot complications and rhetorical entanglements, so that the one quality it most conspicuously lacks is the unilinear directness of the fable. *A Fable*, one regretfully concludes, is still another of those 'distinguished' bad books that flourish in America.... However that may be, a good part of the central action and even outlook of *A Fable* bears a remarkable closeness to the tradition of the radical or pacifist anti-war novel. That *A Fable* contains a heavy weight of Christian material complicates but does not invalidate this point, since the main happenings of the book can be seen as quite compatible with a strict naturalism."

Irving Howe  
*William Faulkner: A Critical Study*  
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 269, 276



"*A Fable* (1954) is a philosophical book expressing in the form of a morality Faulkner's matured and comprehensive ideas about human character and human life. Essentially, Faulkner depicts a fundamental dualism in the nature of man, which produces continuing conflict and tension. The generalissimo in the novel defines the dualism: 'we are two articulations...[of] two inimical conditions... I champion of this mundane earth...you champion of an esoteric realm of man's baseless hopes and his infinite capacity... The human heart in conflict with itself [quoting Nobel Prize Speech] defines precisely the subject of *A Fable*. The various characters and episodes present a composite image of man at war with himself.

The supreme general and the corporal are of the same flesh and blood. This conflict between father and son symbolizes the eternal conflict between flesh and spirit, the practical and the ideal. This dualism in human nature is not in itself a complicated idea, but its effect upon the way men live and upon the values they live by is very complicated. For one who recognizes this dualism, moral judgments are difficult because the distinctions between good and evil become hazy. The corporal, for example, by choosing martyrdom causes the death of General Gragnon. And the supreme general can preserve his own power only by executing the corporal; but by making the corporal a martyr, he strengthens the inimical force the corporal epitomizes. Jesus, himself, did not convert the world: 'it was pagan and blood Rome which did it with His martyrdom.' Such paradoxes abound in the novel.

Because of his dual nature, man is his own enemy. The institutions that oppress and repress him are his creations, and they endure only because man himself endures. The military hierarchy, which in the novel represents all institutions that wield power over individual men, is the creation of man. The group commander, Bidet, tells General Gragnon: 'It wasn't we who invented war.... It was war which created us'.... Man's greed and rapacity, his drive for self-aggrandizement, produce wars and the military. The self-interest of his personal life is reflected in his society. Egoism isolates the individual from his fellow-men and it isolates nation from nation.... The military reflects man's dual nature. Dedicated to self-preservation and the extension of its mundane power and glory, it also expresses the human capacity for sacrifice and honor and fidelity....

The plot of *A Fable* develops from a sudden upsurge of the submerged humane spirit and the resulting struggle of the mundane to re-establish the status quo. Present action in the book extends over a period of one week during the spring of 1918. On Monday morning, a French regiment, inspired by a corporal and twelve disciples, refuses to respond to an order to attack. The supporting forces remain in the trenches, and the enemy does not initiate a counterattack. By noon, the entire French front is quiet, and by three in the afternoon, all firing has ceased on the Western front. The cessation of activity on both sides of no man's land is, in reality, by secret arrangement between the Allied commanders and the German military commanders. They have learned of the enlisted men's desire to lay down their arms, and they arrange a meeting to decide upon a plan to counter the rebellion among the men on both sides of the battle line.

General Gragnon, a French division commander, places the entire regiment of mutinying men under arrest, and he demands permission from his superiors to execute the three thousand men. On Wednesday morning the regiment, including the corporal and his twelve disciples, is brought to Paris and placed in a hastily-constructed compound. An English message runner, a follower of the corporal, discovers that a convoy of trucks heading for the front lines carries dummy ammunition. He deduces that the military hierarchy is plotting to render ineffective the corporal's influence. He urges a sentry for whom the men in the English battalion have a strange allegiance to lead the unit into no man's land. The runner hopes to carry on what the corporal initiated and by an ineradicable demonstration of unity between the men on both sides of the battle line below the rank of sergeant to prevent the military from carrying out its plan.

The sentry, however, is violently unreceptive, and he beats the runner unconscious. The runner regains his senses and witnesses the arrival of the German general over allied territory. He realizes that the blank ammunition fired at the plane is to prevent the soldiers from thinking that the German general has come to discuss the peace that the common soldier has temporarily achieved by asserting that he was tired of war and laying down his arms. The English runner rushes to Paris to appeal to an American Negro for help. The Reverend Sutterfield knew the English sentry for nearly three years in the United States. The Negro minister and the English runner return to the front lines. Though the sentry remains uncooperative, he does go over the top with the Negro and the runner. The battalion follows, and from the German trenches,

unarmed soldiers rush out to meet them. But the two groups never meet. An artillery barrage from both sides destroys them.

The barrage is ordered by the German and Allied commanders. They have conferred and agreed to conceal the mutiny by treating it as if it had never occurred. To achieve this aim, they need to eliminate only two men: General Gagnon if he continues to demand that the regiment be executed for mutiny, and the corporal if he refuses to cease his opposition to the military. General Gagnon remains adamant, and he is executed. The supreme general of the Allied armies attempts to bribe the corporal to betray the men who followed him. His attempt fails. On Friday, the corporal is executed in the company of two other soldiers guilty of robbery and murder. The General gives the corporal's two sisters and his fiancée permission to bury the dead man. The sisters bring the body to the family farm and bury it in a land bank separating two farms. Before dawn the next morning, an artillery barrage tears up the farm, and the body of the corporal disappears. In the scene describing the mission of the special detachment to pick up a body to be buried in the tomb of the unknown soldier, it is strongly suggested that the corporal's body is the chosen one.

In the allegorical scheme of the novel, the common soldier, led by the corporal, threatens the power of the military, led by the supreme general. The peace the men seek is specifically the end of World War I, but, symbolically, it is the peace on earth, good will toward men that Jesus preached—a union of man with man in a universal brotherhood of the heart, which is to be achieved by a dissolution of selfish interests on all levels, from the aggrandizement of nations to the selfishness of individuals. The opponents, represented by the corporal and the supreme general, are the antithetical forces that exist in every man. By means of a variety of characters and a variety of incidents, Faulkner identifies the character and power of these inimical forces. With the corporal and the common man, he associates the human 'passion for unfact,' ranging from the profane to the divine, man's capacity for belief, hope, sacrifice, love, unselfishness—all the manifestations of what Faulkner in his public speeches during the final years of his life seemed to refer to as 'the human spirit.'

With the supreme general and the military hierarchy, he associates man's passion for worldly success and glory—power over others, wealth, rank—all the pursuits that nurture the ego and thereby separate man from man, nation from nation. Because the contending forces are encompassed in one organism, the human being, they are not mutually exclusive. Among the officers are believers like the quartermaster general, and among the common men is Polchek, the Judas of *A Fable*.

A few critics have noted that though the life and death of the corporal are obviously intended to parallel the life and death of Jesus, the corporal's personality does not suggest the Biblical Jesus.... Despite the misleading crosses that adorn the 1954 edition, Faulkner utilizes the Christian story only as a myth. In *A Fable*, Jesus is not the son of God; he is the son of Man. What he preached and epitomized in his death is inherent in all men. Jesus is the pure incarnation of that part of human nature which is opposed to the rapacious. The myth of Jesus, like all myths, embodies in a personality certain universal qualities, and therefore the entire story of Jesus can be enacted over and over so long as human nature remains the same. The corporal works no miracles and makes no claims of divinity, but he achieves what Jesus achieved and expresses what Jesus expressed because he articulates, or at least personifies, the potential inherent in all men.

The corporal is an alien, and among his twelve disciples there are some who do not even speak French. The corporal does not, however, need to preach to the soldiers. His mere presence, even among the German soldiers, is sufficient to bring to the surface their common desire for peace and unity. Because the corporal personifies the repressed generosity and good will of the men, he can silently interrupt their gambling, take their money and give it to a young couple who must marry. The men adopt the couple and provide a wedding.... The corporal does not convert the men; he simply translates potential into action by embodying in a pure state the unselfishness and brotherliness that exist in all men. Such universal Christ-qualities are generally repressed by the dominant antithetical qualities of self-interest.... The characteristics and capabilities that he personifies transcend individual men; they are the immortal heritage of mankind. But the antitheses of these characteristics are also man's immortal heritage....

Faulkner, dramatizing universal human characteristics, utilizes ancient myths to reinforce those he is creating. His major characters are not, as most commentators have noted, breathing human beings. They are probably not intended to be. As mythical characters, they are supreme expressions of particular aspects of the human personality.... By direct or implied allusions to Biblical, or mythical, or legendary figures, he elevates his characters into archetypes: the quartermaster general is Isaiah or Man Hoping; the supreme general is Man Conquering and Man Ruling, reincarnation of Alexander, or Caesar, or Napoleon; the English runner is Man Seeking Faith. And though he writes within the Western tradition, Faulkner equates all religious beliefs as expressions of hope.... What Faulkner means by believing in hope is clarified in *A Fable*. So long as there is belief in the hope of salvation, the lamb in man contends with the wolf. The novel, in effect, argues that man holds his salvation within his own being, but it also shows why man has failed and continues to fail of its achievement: the wolf remains ascendant over the lamb, the mundane over the humane....

Just as the corporal, on one level, unites the soldiers in a brotherhood opposed to the military hierarchy, the horse and groom, on another level, produce a similar unity among the country people against the pursuing authorities. The hero of this strange, symbolic legend is an English groom, a foul-mouthed, repulsive creature... But this lowest among men, without becoming outwardly any more acceptable or amiable, undergoes a spiritual transformation, which is symbolized by his baptism into the Baptist religion and his initiation into the secret order of Masons.... In the legend, the pursuing authorities parallel the military of the main story, and the Federal deputy marshal plays a role identical with that of the English runner. The marshal, like the runner who was an architect student, is a mute poet....

The runner finally becomes a believer, and with the help of Sutterfield, leads the sentry and the battalion into no man's land. The Negro, who for some time has been wearing a French corporal's uniform, symbol of the corporal's presence in *Everyman*, is killed in the artillery barrage that the military hierarchy orders. Harry dies too, but not before he sees the men coming behind him and joins in their cries of hope and exultation.... The runner is the only man who escapes with his life. His wounds make him an image of man's dual nature. Flame envelops half his body... On the scorched and seared side, his eye socket is empty, his mouth paralyzed, an arm and a leg are missing. The mundane power is triumphant; the spiritual has been scarred and maimed, but it is alive because it is immortal....

Sutterfield, the Negro minister, functions as a central and multi-faceted symbol in *A Fable*. He serves as a link between the horse-groom story and the corporal's, but more significantly, he is Man Believing.... Most of the major characters in the novel offer their views of the human being, but only two characters, Sutterfield and the supreme general, recognize and accept man's dual nature. The supreme general chooses to champion the mundane; the Negro champions the spiritual. The English groom...embodies the extremes of sinfulness and spiritual exaltation; and the Negro's continuing faith in Harry symbolizes his faith in the spiritual potential of man despite his propensity to sin. The most significant demonstration of the Negro's faith in man is his acceptance of the repulsive and uncooperative groom as the symbol of the savior. Sutterfield is not an ordained minister; his doctrine is simply a belief in man, and his is a vital faith because it encompasses antitheses.... His skin coloring is of no significance because he is Man Believing and Hoping. It is to this man that the runner, who is also a seeker, comes and rediscovers his faith in man....

Throughout the novel, the father-son theme reflects the contending forces in the nature of man. The son is equated with youth, freedom, hope, belief, and rebellion; the father, with disillusionment, loss of faith, acceptance of the status quo, and mundane power. Those who seek faith await the rebellion of the son, the assertion of that fresh, uncorrupted belief in man which is the privilege of youth.... The mutiny, which is led by the corporal, who is the son of the supreme general, becomes a rebellion of son against father, youth against age, hope and belief against cynicism. The runner defines the struggle between the authorities and the men as a struggle between belief and the hierarchy of established power....

The quartermaster general, like the other idealists in the novel, puts his faith in a concept but not in man. He is ineffectual because he fails to recognize the complexity of the human being and the inevitable alloying that ideals must undergo when transformed into action. His conversation with the generalissimo after he discovers the intended purpose of the dummy ammunition reveals the weakness of the idealist, the dreamer.... The idealist is defeated by the antitheses which make up human existence. Like the

quartermaster general, the young aviator Levine is destroyed by his uncompromising idealism... The mature Bridesman accepts the situation, but the immature Levine cannot, and finally kills himself. In contrast to these idealists, the generalissimo accepts the double edge of reality. His vision of man and of life, like Sutterfield's, is comprehensive enough to encompass man's dualism.... In the everlasting battle of the human heart with itself, the balance of power rests with self-interest, and the general has chosen to be on the side of the stronger....

More than any other character in the novel, the general reveals the choice which every man must face. The quotation from Marlowe, with its theme of suppressed guilt, sums up the supreme general's career. In another country, he got a woman with child and deserted her. She died in childbirth, but it is the corporal whom the general fathered. His evasion of moral responsibility for the woman and child symbolizes his decision to pursue the glories of the world and repress his own moral and spiritual impulses. These, represented by the corporal, are inexpugnable....

Even Faulkner's shifts in style from abstract and symbolic narration to realistic detailed storytelling express the dualism of man. His version of the last supper, for instance, is startling in its realism. It is our first close-up view of the corporal and his twelve disciples. They have, before this, been presented through the minds of others and have generally been treated as a reincarnation of Christ and his disciples. Thus it is a shock to encounter these rough and crude men whose conversation is dominated by discussion of their pending execution. There is nothing otherworldly in this scene....

Faulkner's vision of man's dual nature and his mature recognition of the complexity of moral judgment are successfully transformed into art. If the book is approached as a morality rather than a novel, it provides a rich, provocative experience. Having said this, however, I hasten to add that Faulkner's penchant, during this stage of his career, for abstract statements about man and life produces, in *A Fable*, too many exasperatingly obtuse passages and too many dull abstract speeches that induce more irritation than thought."

Edmond L. Volpe  
*A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1964) 282-304

"The setting of *A Fable* is the First World War—an event in history that marked the turning point at which man's material progress and his control over the forces of nature became no longer an index of his strength but an indication of his failure to achieve an equivalent spiritual growth.... *A Fable* is less a novel, in the traditional sense, than a group of set pieces collected around a modern allegory of Passion Week and intended to intensify its meaning. As such, it draws heavily on a number of more or less obvious parallels to Christ's mission and death: the Corporal, like Christ, is born in a stable in winter; he comes into the fullness of his mission when he is approximately thirty-three, has a group of twelve close followers, of whom one, Polchek, betrays him, and another, Pierre Bouc, denies him. As Christ was tempted by the devil in the wilderness with the offer of power over the cities of the world, the Corporal is tempted with secular power by the Marshal.

Christ was crucified between two thieves for sedition against the Jewish state; the Corporal is executed between two thieves for what amounts to traitorous action against the ruling military power. Christ's crown of thorns becomes a circlet of barbed wire accidentally entangled around the head of the dead Corporal, and the former's resurrection and disappearance from his tomb is paralleled by the disappearance of the Corporal's body from his grave after it has been struck by mortar fire. Christ's Magdalene was former prostitute who becomes one of his devoted followers; the Corporal's fiancée was formerly a Marseilles whore. Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus in the New Testament, become Marya and Marthe, the Corporal's half-sisters. The Runner, who tries to carry on the Corporal's attempt to end the war, plays Paul to the Corporal's Christ....

## CHARACTERS

The Marshal, *also called The Old General, commander of Allied Forces*  
The Corporal, *his illegitimate son*

Marthe, *the corporal's half sister*  
Marya, *Marthe's feeble-minded older sister*  
Young Woman, *formerly Marseilles prostitute, affianced to the Corporal*  
Quartermaster General  
British runner, *formerly an officer*  
British sentry, *formerly a horse groom*  
Reverend Tobe Sutterfield, *Negro lay preacher and former stablehand*  
David Levine, *young British airman*  
General Gragnon, *commander of division that includes the Corporal's regiment*  
General Lallemond, *corps commander over Gragnon and his only friend*

#### SET PIECES

1. General Gragnon, having ordered an attack that he knew was intended by his superiors to fail, considers the mutiny of one of his regiments to be a personal failure of himself as general, and a dishonor to his reputation and his division's record. He asks to have the entire regiment—and therefore himself—placed under arrest and executed.... 2. Two British privates—a Sentry and a Runner—are introduced. The events leading up to the Sentry's violent attack on the Runner at the end of this section go back to 1912.... 3. A young British airman, David Levine, is called in from a flight on Monday morning as a result of a temporary cease fire on the French front.... 4. Picking up the scene in the Place de Ville with which the book opened, Faulkner returns to the figure of the young woman as a means of introducing the relationship between the Corporal who led the mutiny of Monday morning and the Marshal... who is to hear and decide on General Gragnon's request that the regiment be executed.... 5. The concluding section picks up, at different points in time, the final threads in the careers of the Corporal, the Marshal, the Runner, and the former Quartermaster General.

#### TECHNIQUE

The creation of individual characters and the revelation of meaning through their interaction is largely sacrificed to philosophical abstraction and to a kind of vagueness that is probably intended to emphasize the universal by avoiding the particular.... Faulkner has used this technique—the withholding of meaning—far more successfully in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying*, forcing the reader to participate in the development of the action, to discover for himself the manifold nature of human reality, and finally to achieve, at a higher level than would otherwise be possible, an approximation of a multidimensional, perhaps inexhaustible truth. In *A Fable*, however, this obfuscation of fact seems to serve very little purpose, since the final process of clarification makes the reader aware not so much of the bias and lack of perspective of the characters as of their allegorical and representative functions....

#### ANALYSIS

The complex philosophical structure of *A Fable* is perhaps best seen in terms of the dialectic of paired opposites in the persons of the Marshal and the Corporal.... The secularization of *A Fable*, in which the Marshal assumes the power and position of an earthly deity, is paralleled in the modern world in which the secular ends of power, wealth, and prestige have come to overshadow ethical and humanitarian goals. The Marshal's power and society's secular emphasis are not necessarily wrong in themselves, but they become evils when man allows himself to be totally possessed by them.... War as an end in itself is an expression of one of man's most innermost needs: a structure in the hierarchy of which he can believe and feel at home. In this sense it is a modern substitute for the office once performed by the Church...

As Nietzsche's Will to Power sprang from his belief that God was dead and, with Him, the entire religio-ethical system of moral imperatives and proscribed acts, so the secular consciousness and will to power of the military leaders in springs from the failure of moribund world views, no longer tenable in a scientific age, to give man a sense of importance in his universe. But the result is the spiritual death of humanity—as must occur in any system whose rigidity denies human freedom.... Thus the Marshal comes to represent Authority—the authority of the father over the dependent child, of the leader of the state over the citizens, of the Old Testament Father-God over his children. He is strongly reminiscent of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, who, as leader of the Church, has corrupted—or

corrected—Christ’s attempts to give men the terrible burden of freedom, and given them, in Christ’s name, what their weak hearts really crave—‘a mystery which they must follow blindly, even against their conscience’...

Faulkner has remarked that to him the Marshal ‘was the dark, splendid, fallen angel...Satan...’ However, this is to oversimplify...for there is nothing essentially evil about him; he is rather a modern—and human—version of the Old Testament Jehovah, powerful and jealous of his power, paternalistic, aware of man’s ‘ineradicable folly, his deathless passion for being led, mystified, and deceived.’ As such, he is an ambivalent figure in which are mixed both positive and negative qualities. This ambivalence serves to underline one of the major themes of the novel, the philosophical dualism that sees both good and evil as inextricably part of the nature and experience of man.”

Dorothy Tuck  
*Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner*  
(Crowell 1964) 144-52

“The solution to a good many problems in Faulkner’s work may be found in *A Fable* (1954), because here the picture of the author’s view of the world appears much more explicit than elsewhere. Fundamentally it is an attempt to disentangle the comprehensibly confused issue of man’s state of being by means of a realignment of opposites. The scene is the Western Front of the First World War with the events centering round the mutiny of a British and French army unit. The narrative moves on several levels, of which the allegorical one is most easily discernible: the story of a saintly corporal from Asia Minor who refuses to fight and has to be shot—into details about his twelve followers, of whom one denies him and another betrays him, and the three women who take away his body. Here is love, suffering, kindness, hope and faith. But the story does not remain on the Christian level. There is the supreme commander of the allied armies, a man of infinite wisdom, justice and power, who, in vain, tries to tempt the corporal to give up his cause. Although he knows him to be his own illegitimate son, he decides to sacrifice him, and he does not hesitate to get together with the enemy in order to destroy the mutinous regiments because this appears to be the only way to prevent chaos from disturbing the order of things.

This reads almost like a Manichean myth—the generalissimo embodying both good and evil (God and Satan) in one person, together with qualities that appear to have their own ambiguous nature: power as the origin of order *and* cruelty, justice as the cause of law *and* suffering, wisdom as embracing knowledge *and* temptation. Against all these forces the force of love is active, but it will never overcome them, though both man and his folly will as such endure and prevail. Logically the whole structure of *A Fable*, based on the dualistic principle of contrast, parallel and inversion, carries more conviction than most of Faulkner’s other works, and often produces effects of terrible irony and extraordinary humor.

There is, for instance, the story of the English groom who races a three-legged horse in America and later becomes responsible for a mutiny primarily caused by a sort of confidence trick and yet in the end producing the same suffering as the one based on the love of Man. There are the gruesome events leading to the ceremonial burial of the body of the conscientious objector in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. And there is the figure of the runner, originally an officer, who only by committing an immoral act can find his way back to the ranks and to his destiny as one to suffer with the others, to curse and to laugh, but also to understand.

Five times in the story occurs the significant motif of the stranger in a hostile crowd, which inevitably recalls Faulkner’s fundamental problem of alienation. And even the seemingly trivial but frequent references to medals and sabres, to eating and drinking appear in contexts where their symbolic implications as human and metaphysical elements will hardly be overlooked. To the non-American reader *A Fable* may well prove to be the most important American novel since the Second World War.”

Heinrich Straumann  
University of Zurich  
*American Literature in the Twentieth Century*  
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 92-93

“This novel is, finally, a colossal failure and a colossal bore, and...it is as confused in conception as in execution. What I do not agree with is that it represents merely an extension of Faulkner’s work. It may well be true—and I assume that it is true—that Faulkner intended *A Fable* to be an extension, and a generalization of the *meaning*, of his previous work, and to serve as a basis of exegesis for his work. And it is true that themes and ideas do come over from the past. But there is a difference, and a crucial one, between *A Fable* and the other work (with the exception of *Intruder in the Dust...*)... *A Fable* is abstractly conceived; it is an idea deductively worked out—and at critical moments, blurred out. By the very absoluteness of the failure, however, *A Fable* indicates, not so much the limit of, as the nature of, Faulkner’s success. Faulkner, like Antaeus, could fight only with his feet on the ground—on home ground.... Ideas without the mark of their experiential origin can only, to use Eliot’s word, ‘violate’ the consciousness of such a novelist as Faulkner. In *A Fable*, an idea ‘violated’ the consciousness of Faulkner.... In *A Fable* the failure is at root one of tone—we don’t know how we are to take his fable in relation to the ‘realities’....”

Robert Penn Warren, ed.  
“Introduction: Faulkner: Past and Future”  
*Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*  
(Prentice-Hall, Twentieth-Century Views 1966) 16-17

“At the core of the plot was the unsuccessful attempt by an obscure French corporal in the First World War to promote a battlefield mutiny designed to end a senseless conflict. A comparison with the action of Jesus of Nazareth was already a part of the plan, but in dealing with it Faulkner elected to go the route of formal allegory, providing the corporal and his action with a multitude of details suggestive of the Christ story, among them twelve male followers (or disciples) including a traitorous Judas and a reluctant Simon Peter, a temptation episode, a magdalen, two friendly sisters reminiscent of Mary and Martha, a crown of thorns, a death between thieves, and an empty tomb. The burden of it all, in the minds of those who had urged the project upon him and initially in Faulkner’s mind as well, was to have been that mankind, now embarked on a second world war, must somehow be prevented from repeating the disaster of the first....”

Biographical evidence leaves no doubt that Faulkner thought of what he had done as a major accomplishment, perhaps the most important one of his career; but even uncritical admirers have found it difficult to adjust their sights to a work that is in itself stylistically inconsistent and in most aspects irreconcilable with the rest of the Faulkner canon. One suspects that Faulkner himself may have found it disconcerting that as he explored the implications of its context, a work which had begun as a simple moral fable on a subject about which he felt deeply grew into something that all the narrative devices at his command could not present convincingly within the scope of a single work of fiction. Even so, *A Fable*, failure though it may be, is probably the most ambitious attempt at a comprehensive religious novel yet produced in America and one that in time may come to be regarded as a historically important critique of the complex of myths that for more than a thousand years served as a vehicle for Christian belief and enabled it to generate and support a major civilization.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 114-15

Michael Hollister (2015)