

ANALYSIS

Soldier's Pay (1926)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“As early as *Soldier's Pay* (1926) the same theme [tradition] is the basis for Mr. Faulkner's organization of experience; and it is the best possible indication of the urgency of the theme with him that it should be central in his first novel. Mahon, the old Episcopal clergyman, conscious of sin, tolerant of human weakness, is still unaware of the vital opponent to his formalized and so impotent, tradition—the amorality with which history has surrounded him. Donald Mahon, his son, is brought home from the World War, dying; in him, the minister's code has faced anti-traditional history. Because Donald is not dead, the conflict must continue; locally, it is between the preacher and Cecily Saunders (Donald's fiancée before he went to war) with her family and associates who are typical of the new Jazz Era. Obviously, Cecily's world of jazz and flappers and sleek-haired jelly-beans represents the same antitraditional historical movement that brought Flem Snopes into Bayard Sartoris' bank. The names and the settings are different; that is all.”

George Marion O'Donnell
“Faulkner's Mythology”
The Kenyon Review I.3 (1939)

“Like Hemingway's early novels, but with hardly a grain of their fierce authority, *Soldier's Pay* announced the discovery of a generation that has been sold and is 'lost.' No longer very striking or fresh by the time Faulkner came to it, this theme is embodied in a story about a war veteran, Donald Mahon, on his way to Georgia. Mahon is so badly wounded, so little able to respond either to his own condition or the people clustered about him, that he cannot possibly sustain the significant burdens the story thrusts upon him. Strong emotions, uncontained and without attachment, swirl through the book, while at the center lies an inert victim—suggesting a pathos so extreme that the writer cannot direct it toward any end but itself. After the opening pages, all that can happen is a footnoting of Mahon's known and irrevocable plight. The circle of characters surrounding him, despite Faulkner's efforts to set up some ironic by-play, really cannot do much but wait until he dies. So pitiful a figure offers small incentive to dramatic or moral development, and one comes to suspect that for Faulkner the true value of the book lies not in anything he can make of the returned veteran, but in some anterior image of him as victim.

The writing consists of a bright rhetorical impasto, the style of a young man who adores style. There are many pasteboard gems: 'a pure quivering chord of music wordlessly and far away,' 'moon-silvered ridges above the valleys where mist hung slumberous,' and more. When set against the subject matter, it seems a style strangely, even flauntingly, incongruous. Perhaps the explanation is that the style comes from Faulkner's reading of Swinburne, Housman, and *The Rubaiyat*, while the subject reflects his own unsettled feelings...the feelings which had been with him since at least the time of the war and which had received only tepid expression in his poems....

Yet the book has a certain interest, not so much in its own right as for signs and anticipations of the writer to come. There are passages, bits of description and miniature set-pieces, that show a decided verbal talent. There are other passages that display Faulkner's gift for precise evocation of place and moment. In the opening scene, in which Mahon is being taken home on a train, Faulkner records some fine talk among the soldiers and other passengers, neatly capturing the post-war atmosphere, if not as it really was in American life, then as it was being stylized in American literature. And in the final scene two of the more sympathetic characters, saddened by the consequences of Mahon's death and the general air of desolation which surrounds them, wander toward a Negro church—the first of several episodes in Faulkner's novels where white people, sick with self-awareness, turn for cleansing to the Negroes... This is hardly distinguished writing, if only because of an excessive reliance on the moon; but even in these self-conscious periods there is a faint anticipation of the later Faulkner.”

“The reviews were concerned chiefly to ‘place’ it in the tradition of post-war fiction, to which it, to all appearances, belonged. As such, the novel seemed to promise nothing more than an addition to that literature. Even here, however, lines were drawn. Thomas Boyd called the novel ‘Honest but Slap-dash’ (*Saturday Review of Literature*, April 24, 1926), and described its characters as ‘vague, abnormally behaving characters who waver uncertainly and fantastically....’ The English reviews were largely patronizing: Mr. Faulkner has talent, is fortunately young and may outgrow the faults so obvious in this tale. One English reviewer went to the opposite extreme (*The New Statesman*, June 28, 1930) and considered Faulkner superior to both Lawrence and Hemingway: ‘I can remember no first novel of such magnificent achievement in the last thirty years.’ In the reviews both of this and of the next novel (*Mosquitoes*) there are several discerning references to Faulkner’s imitativeness of style, to the ‘echoes’ from late nineteenth-century poetry.”

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt /Harbinger 1963) 15

“Donald Mahon, returning home to Georgia after the First World War, sick and with a terrible facial scar, comes into contact with Private Joe Gilligan and Cadet Julian Lowe. Though these two have been previously drinking and making nuisances of themselves on the train, they begin to develop a sense of responsibility for the badly ill Mahon, and, with Mrs. Margaret Powers, a young war widow also traveling on the train, adopt Mahon as their charge. Lowe, an adolescent enamored of death and glory, imagines that he is in love with Mrs. Powers, but soon leaves the party to go on to his mother in San Francisco, while Gilligan and Mrs. Powers take Mahon home to Georgia....

CHARACTERS

Donald Mahon, *lieutenant in the R.A.F. (royal airforce)*
Mrs. Margaret Powers, *war widow age 24*
Joe Gilligan, *Army private*
Julian Lowe, *young air cadet*
Cecily Saunders, *Donald’s fiancée*
Rector Mahon, *Donald’s father*
Januarius Jones

Mahon’s arrival at home, where he had been presumed dead, provides the central focus of the story. His fiancée, Cecily Saunders, faints at the sight of his badly scarred face. His father, an Episcopal rector, accepts the situation with stoic dignity, though he tends to be overoptimistic about Mahon’s chances of recovery. Emmy, the serving girl who had had a brief and romantic affair with Mahon before he left for the war, is heartbroken over his failure to recognize her. Neighbors flit through to tee the War Hero, indifferent or curious and wrapped up in their own concerns. Januarius Jones, a coarse satyrlike figure, nimbly pursues every available young female.

Only Mrs. Powers and the no-nonsense, somewhat hard-bitten Gilligan recognize that Mahon is dying; only they, the Rector, and Emmy are genuinely concerned for his welfare. Mahon lives in a semi-comatose state, almost unaware of or completely unconcerned with his surroundings, unable to remember how he was wounded, and slowly going blind. The response of the other characters to him reveals their isolation from him, as well as from one another, and the gap between the illusory civilian idolization of the War Hero and the embittering reality of war. Thus young Cadet Lowe (who never appears on the Mahon home scene but whose presence intrudes from time to time in the form of adolescent love letters to Mrs. Powers) subscribes to the civilian death-and-glory complex, for the war had ended before he could see action.

Mrs. Burney, whose son Dewey is dead, comforts herself effusively with thoughts of his bravery and scorns those whose loved ones were cowardly enough not to get themselves killed. The irony of this situation is heavily underscored by the repeated musings of Sergeant Madden, who saw Dewey, crazed with fear that the morning mist on the battle front was poison gas, leap onto the fire-step and shoot Lieutenant Powers—Margaret Powers' husband—for leading them into what Dewey believed was certain death. Cecily Saunders, who had become engaged to Mahon when he was going away to become a War Hero, feels nothing but revulsion for the Mahon who has returned from the war. Finally, Januarius Jones acts as the epitome of civilian indifference to the reality of war, so much so that, though constantly in and out of the rectory, he rarely even lays eyes on Mahon.

Mahon's isolation becomes alienation both from himself and from the world. He is unable to connect his present, dying existence with his living—and now effectively dead—past. Several characters think of the old Donald, who is dead, as one individual and the invalided, dying Donald as another. Indeed, this separation between the Donald they remember and the man who has come home to die becomes so sharp that on one occasion the Rector speaks in Donald's presence of the objections of Cecily's parents to her marrying him; he, too, has come to think of the invalid as an insentient, almost nonexistent thing.

As Donald's isolation is emphasized by the physical and mental condition that has effectively removed him from the world, the isolation of the civilians is made ironically sharper by their going through the motions of love without experiencing the sense of communication that real love brings. Thus Cecily, engaged to Donald and occasionally protesting her love for him, is completely without feeling for him, save a sense of revulsion. Provocative but sexless, vain, epicene, she first leads on and then repulses the lecherous Januarius Jones. Though she surrenders once to the sophomoric George Farr, she runs weeping from the scene and tortures him thereafter with her flirtatious behavior with other men. The goatlike Jones pursues first Cecily, then Mrs. Powers, and finally the distraught Emmy, who, though she surrenders to the person of Jones on the night of Donald's death, is actually reliving her experience with the 'old' Donald.

Mrs. Powers and Gilligan, more perceptive and with more human potential than the rest of the characters, seem to be fighting their way out of the no man's land of aloneness. Mrs. Powers' concern for Donald, and, ultimately her marriage to him when Cecily runs away to marry George Farr, is best seen as an act of expiation for her first marriage, into which she entered in much the same way as Cecily entered her engagement to Mahon—a meaningless, impersonal relationship springing out of the cult of the War Hero. Only Emmy and the Rector, of all the characters who had known the 'old' Donald, have an inner dignity and strength that enables them to adjust to the change and endure the situation that Donald's return creates. They can accept what they cannot change. Mrs. Powers thinks of Emmy: 'The Donald she had known was dead; this one was but a sorry substitute, but Emmy was going to make the best of it, as women will.' The Rector, speaking to Gilligan after Donald's death can say, 'Well, Joe, things are back to normal again. People come and go, but Emmy and I seem to be like the biblical rocks.' Which, indeed, they are. Some of their characteristics foreshadow those of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, who can bear suffering with fortitude, and the many other characters in Faulkner's later work who embody the virtues of the human heart—compassion, sacrifice, and endurance....

Soldier's Pay was not an especially auspicious beginning for Faulkner's career as a novelist; the book was favorably reviewed, but it did not sell well. Though the writing is competent—occasionally quite good, frequently overromantic—the characterization is sometimes stereotyped and two-dimensional, particularly that of Cecily, the apotheosis of the flapper. The major charge that can be brought against the book, however, is that it is not Faulkner writing from the heart, but diligently imitating other successful novelists of the time. There are echoes of F. Scott Fitzgerald in the 'jazz age' scene at the dance, and of Aldous Huxley in the flippant, satiric conversations of Cecily and Jones.

Drawing-room witticisms are simply not Faulkner's metier, and there is sometimes a tone of coy artificiality which, however deliberate, does not suit the overall tone of the book. There is, to be sure, a good deal of satiric humor in the caricature of Jones, and there are positive steps in the direction of Faulkner's later work, notably the closing, melancholic, and peaceful description of the singing coming from the Negro church, which anticipates the Negro Easter service in the fourth section of *The Sound and*

the Fury. All in all, *Soldier's Pay* is the work of a promising young novelist, but one would scarcely expect such a work as *The Sound and the Fury* to follow it in only three years.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 125-28

Michael Hollister (2015)