

ANALYSIS

“Raid” (1934)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

[Summer 1863]: “Mrs. Millard, Bayard, and Ringo leave Jefferson on a trip to Mrs. Millard’s sister at Hawkhurst, Alabama. While on the road, they are passed by a massive group of Negroes bound in a kind of hysterical trance for ‘Jordan.’ At Hawkhurst, as at Sartoris, the house has been burned and the white people live in a Negro cabin; the railroad, the Atlanta-Chattanooga line, has been torn up by the Yankees. With Drusilla Hawk, the Sartorises try to stop an army of Negroes from crossing the river on a bridge the Yankees are about to blow up, but they are swept by the tide of Negroes into the river. Their horses drown, but they are fetched up on the other side, where Mrs. Millard demands to be brought to the Yankee Colonel Dick. The Colonel, overburdened with the spoils of war, gives them ten chests of silver to replace the one the Yankees had stolen the year before, many mules and Negroes, and a paper requisitioning still more mules, silver, and Negroes from other Yankee regiments.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 68

“The reality of the Southern tragedy pierces the legend as Bayard, now fourteen, begins to comprehend. On the trip to Hawkhurst in Alabama, Bayard and Ringo [his black friend] boyishly contemplate seeing the railroad. Bayard has visited Hawkhurst once and his experience is one of the few that the two boys have not shared. Ringo eagerly anticipates the opportunity to catch up with his friend. Absorbed though he is by this childish rivalry, Bayard notes the cruel scars the war has left upon the land they travel through. His awareness of the widespread destruction reaches its climax when he sees the railroad tracks at Hawkhurst, torn from the ground and twisted around a tree.

He is now ready to understand the symbolic significance of Drusilla’s story about the defiant and proud Confederate locomotive racing for the last time along the tracks with the Yankee engine in pursuit. And he does not miss the irony of Drusilla’s bitter speech about how dull and stupid life was before the fathers and fiancés went off to war to be killed. Bayard is now capable of understanding Loosh’s strange excitement and of sensing the tragedy of the chanting hypnotized Negroes moving blindly toward a freedom they long for but to not understand.

Notable in ‘Raid’ and in the other episodes of the novel [*The Unvanquished*] is the absence of bias. In no scene are the Yankees depicted as cruel invaders, and the Negroes are handled with compassion and understanding. Ringo, a Negro who remains faithful to the old order, is not accorded more sympathy than Loosh, who seeks freedom. Granny Millard treats Loosh and the Negroes they meet along the road as foolish and misguided children, but when she asks Loosh what right he had to tell the Yankees where the Sartoris family silver was buried, she can offer no reply to his poignant response: ‘You ax me that?... Where John Sartoris? Whyn’t he come and ax me that? Let God ax John Sartoris who the man name that give me to him. Let the man that buried me in the black dark ax that of the man what dug me free.’

Ringo enters manhood in this third episode, which is the best of the first six stories [*The Unvanquished*]. On the trip to Hawkhurst, Granny will not permit either boy to drive the mules she has been forced to ‘borrow.’ After they leave the Yankee camp with the twelve chests of silver, the sixty mules and the column of Negroes, Ringo takes the reins and responds to the Yankee lieutenant who asks them how many of the one-hundred-and-ten requisitioned mules they lack. The fourteen-year-old Negro boy, whom the Colonel said was more intelligent than Bayard, begins his activities as Granny’s partner. The superiority of Ringo is dramatized in the story that follows, ‘Riposte in Tertio.’ It is Ringo who understands the character of Ab Snopes whom Granny is forced to deal with, and it is Ringo who first realizes that Ab has sold them out.

Several incidents reveal the significance of the Negro's assumption of leadership over Bayard. Distrusting and disliking Ab Snopes, Ringo does not call him 'Mister,' a violation of the code governing the relations of white and Negro. Granny insists, however, that Ringo use the correct form. In the church scene, Ringo, who has kept Granny's accounts in the ledger and reads out the names of the people whom Mrs. Millard has helped with loans of money and mules, cannot sit with Granny and the white people. He must stay in the gallery reserved for the former slaves.

Despite the drastic alteration of social and economic conditions that the war has brought about, the ante-bellum code continues in force. The war permits Ringo to utilize his natural intelligence and display his superiority to the white boy, and Faulkner dramatizes the disparity between the code, based upon the assumption of Negro inferiority, and reality. Rosa Millard has worked with Ringo; she trusts and respects him' but she adheres rigidly to the old forms through the assumption upon which they are based is manifestly false. In this church scene, Rosa's actions are ritualistic, her manners stylized. The old customs, which have lost their meaning, are already hardening into forms. Mrs. Millard lives in a cabin no better than the dwellings of the people she is regally patronizing, but her manners are those of a matriarch doling out alms to the peasants.

In the same way that the Civil War destroyed the economic foundations—the slave system, the plantations—upon which the social hierarchy was erected, it also lowered the moral barriers between the aristocrats like Miss Rosa and the entrepreneurs like Ab Snopes. Rosa's war-time activities, though morally questionable, do not actually dramatize a weakening of the aristocracy's moral integrity, for Mrs. Millard gives to the poor what she takes from the enemy. While there is a widening gap between the morality she practices and the morality she teaches Bayard and Ringo, her actions are necessary under the circumstances. In the first two stories, Faulkner underscores the breach between the romanticized vision of the child and the reality; in the next two stories, he reveals the widening breach between the older social and religious forms and the new realities that the war creates.”

Edmond L. Volpe
A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Noonday 1964) 79-81

Michael Hollister (2015)