

ANALYSIS

“Red Leaves” (1930)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“‘Red Leaves’ deals with the death of the Indian chief, Issetibbeha, in early Yoknapatawpha, and the flight and eventual capture of his Negro body servant, who must be buried, according to the custom of the tribe, with his master. This story—unquestionably a masterpiece—has the air of a folk tale or miniature epic. Composed with delicate gravity, it encompasses Faulkner’s most genuine themes: the circle of flight from and reconciliation to one’s fate, the use of submissiveness as a means of self-preservation, the value of dignity in defeat and tact in victory. Neither rhetorical nor underwritten, ‘Red Leaves’ employs a swaying bardic prose and a few symbols—the snake, the mud, the gourd—with precise economy. In twentieth-century American fiction only one or two short pieces—‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro,’ ‘The Triumph of the Egg’—form so compact and inevitable a fable of life. More than any other of his stories, ‘Red Leaves’ embodies Faulkner’s feeling for the outrageous mixture which is human experience, its ultimate worthiness and desperate finality.”

Irving Howe
William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 267

“One of Faulkner’s finest stories, ‘Red Leaves’ deals with the autumn of the Old Days, the time of the Indians in Yoknapatawpha County. Issetibbeha, the Man, has just died, and his Negro body servant, to escape the traditional burial of the slave with the dead chief, has fled. The second section recounts the history of Issetibbeha’s father, called Doom, who though descended on the distaff side of a family whose rulers came from the male line, succeeded to the chieftainship when his uncle and cousin died suddenly and mysteriously. Doom began to acquire Negro slaves, and when he died the Indians were faced with the problem of what to do with the now greatly multiplied Negro population, for which they had no real use. Finally they decided to use the slaves to clear the land and raise grain, so that they might breed and feed large numbers of Negroes for the wholesale market.

With the money from the sale of slaves, Issetibbeha was able to go to France. He returned with some ludicrously elegant articles, among them a pair of slippers with red heels which his far and indolent son Mokketubbe, greatly coveted. Then Issetibbeha died and Mokketubbe became the Man. Now, in the present of the third section, the Indians approach Mokketubbe, squatting like a fat oriental potentate among his father’s treasures, and remind him of his duty to lead the pursuit for the fugitive slave so that his father can be properly buried. The fourth section centers on the fleeing body servant who, after five days, is finally caught and, in the fifth section, brought back to the plantation to be sent after his late master.

‘Red Leaves’ exemplifies some of the finer aspects of Faulkner’s narrative skill. Written in a lyrical style that can be both eloquently descriptive and simple and direct, it contrasts the decadent and dying Indian culture with the inarticulate desire for life of the primitive black man. Though there is no direct equation made between the imminent dispossession of the Indian by the white man and the almost moronic, luxury-corrupted figure of Mokketubbe, there is a certain implicit suggestion that the Indians have bought their own downfall with the white man’s money and the white man’s values. Aside from the absurd and fleshy splendor of Mokketubbe, however, the Indians and their tradition are treated with an almost nostalgic sympathy that makes even more compelling the conflict of their interests and those of the black man.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 174-75

Michael Hollister (2015)