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The Sense of Community in Yoknapatawpha Fiction

by Cleanth Brooks

Many years ago I attempted to set forth the importance of the community in Faulkner’s fiction. I argued that failure to take into account the fact of the Southern sense of community kept many otherwise competent readers from understanding what Faulkner was talking about. For example, if a reader was not aware of the kind of community to be found in Faulkner’s Jefferson, he would probably have difficulty in locating the theme of a novel or recognizing the fact of its unity.

I hope that I convinced some of my readers, but the reaction of many ranged from blank incomprehension to testy resistance. I was rapped sharply over the knuckles for defending small-town bigotry and an ingrown and sometimes illiterate provincialism. Clearly, for some of my reviewers there was little to choose between Sinclair Lewis’s Gopher Prairie and Faulkner’s Jefferson except that Jefferson’s principal feature was not a Main Street but the courthouse square, and that Jefferson relieved its general tedium with an occasional lynching, whereas the dullness of Gopher Prairie was never relieved by anything at all.

Professors Harrington and Webb have, therefore, treated me very kindly in allowing me another chance to try again to make a case for the importance of the community in Faulkner’s work. But in view of what happened last time, I shall be well advised to try more carefully to define my terms. I could be very scholarly and begin with Professor Ferdinand Tönnies’ celebrated distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. W. H. Auden, however, has put what is essentially the same distinction less abstractly and more engagingly. He starts with the mere crowd. In one of his lectures he describes a cartoon in The New Yorker. A huge octopus has just emerged from a manhole in a New York street and is attacking a little guy who is carrying an umbrella. The little guy is using his umbrella to protect himself, and a certain number of people have stopped for a moment to watch the encounter (but nobody is offering help). The caption of
the cartoon, as I remember it, was this: "It takes so little to generate a crowd in New York."

Now, this group of onlookers, Auden says, are simply a crowd: a random lot of individuals who happen to be near the scene and who stop for a moment to watch. They have nothing in common except nearness to the scene and a common, brute curiosity. The impersonality of the busy world city is nicely caricatured in the fact that nobody offers to help the little man with the umbrella.

The next stage beyond a crowd, Auden points out, is a society. Men are drawn together for mutual profit. A town needs so many doctors, so many bakers, so many tailors and candlestick makers; so many advertising men, so many stockbrokers, so many corporation lawyers, not to mention so many con men and so many pickpockets. The ties that bind the members of a society together are finally economic: the relationship of the individuals is functional.

There is nothing, to be sure, wrong with that; but more personal relationships are incidental and ultimately unnecessary. A great American city will frequently contain apartment houses inhabited by people who do not know, and may prefer not to know, the residents in the apartment across the corridor.

The third stage, in Auden's set of categories, is a community—a group of people united by common likes and dislikes, aversions and enthusiasms, tastes, lifestyle, and moral beliefs. The agreement, naturally, is never absolute, but when it is substantial, we have a true community.

Now, it is plain that most communities are also societies. (I am leaving out the specialized communities of a church or a club, or of university professors, or of associations of undertakers, and so on. These are true communities in virtue of their sharing common values, but they are narrowly specialized. It would be a rare city that would consist only of college professors or doctors.) No, most communities are also societies, with their appropriate complements of firemen, housewives, hardware merchants, garbage men, and so on. But it should also be plain that a functioning society need not be a community, and, indeed, the history of America (and of Europe, for that matter) is of former communities dissolving into mere societies.

The reasons are obvious: the decay of religion, increasing moral relativism, the sheer growth of the cities, industrialization, mechanization—all these factors tend to break up the cohesion generated by...
common background, traditional beliefs, and close personal associations. The relatively tight small-town and farming communities of the older America have been disappearing. But they had certainly not disappeared from the world in which Faulkner grew up, and they have an important place in the world that he created in his fiction.

I, too, grew up in such a world. I took for granted the values I shared with my fellows. It was only years later that I became fully conscious of the beliefs, values, and attitudes that I shared, quite unreflectingly, with others. For such a sense of community is like the air we breathe. One simply takes it for granted. It is only when one is deprived of that air—when one begins to stifle and gasp—that he realizes its importance. Once we have lost our community—and usually not until we have lost it—do we come to value it—or even see it for what it is.

But what of that large group of Americans today who have never experienced this sort of community? Let me hasten to say that they comprise many of our brightest and best. What do these people do when they confront Faulkner's world? Well, various things. Some of them simply throw up their hands in incomprehension. Some praise Faulkner for what they take to be his campaign to expose social squalor. But some readers do see what is at stake and come to view the communally knit world that is realized in Faulkner's fiction with interest and sympathy. I do not say that their admiration is uncritical. They may be well aware of its limitations and of its occasionally cruel constraints, but they recognize that the loss of cultural cohesion is a genuine loss, all the more so in a world suffering from alienation and atomization.

Was Faulkner himself aware of this cultural cohesion? Do we simply have to take Mr. Brooks's word for it? Does it ever clearly surface in Faulkner's work? Yes, it does. Let me offer a few obvious instances. The nameless narrator of "A Rose for Emily" never says "I thought this" or "I believed that." Throughout the story he uses phrases such as "Our whole town went to her funeral"; "We had long thought"; "We were not pleased exactly, but vindicated"; "We did not say that she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that"; "At first we were glad"; "So the next day we all said"—I could continue, but surely it is evident that the man who tells the story of Miss Emily is consciously speaking for the community, and his story is finally...
about what Miss Emily’s life and death meant to the community.

Or look at the opening page of *The Town*. Chick Mallison, who will be one of the several narrators of the novel, is speaking here. And what does he tell the reader as he begins his account? “So when I say ‘we’ and ‘we thought’ what I mean is Jefferson and what Jefferson thought.” If one wants a much more elaborate—and poignant—account of Chick Mallison’s close and sometimes agonizing relation to Jefferson as his own community, he might recall, in *Intruder in the Dust*, the moving description of a boy’s pride in his community and his fear that it will not live up to what he has come to demand of it.

Yet, a question calculated to deflate the whole importance of community may come from a diametrically opposite quarter. Let me venture to phrase the form it might take: “All right. Everybody has his familiarity with his own world and maybe a sneaking love for it. If that’s all you mean, can’t we find it in almost any other modern American writer? Surely, it’s no rarity.”

Well, let’s look at the work of some of Faulkner’s contemporaries. We might start with Ernest Hemingway. Typically, the Hemingway novel has to do with an outsider—an American in Spain attending the bullfights, or an American fighting on the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War, or an American on the Italian front in the First World War. The American may even feel the attraction of this foreign society which has its own, and to him, exotic, costumes, rituals, and codes. The Hemingway hero certainly looks on it with interest, and at times even with a certain envy; but he never forgets that it is alien to him, and his very awareness of it enforces his sense of his own isolation.

Yes, you will say, but what about his companions—that group of tough-minded, hard-drinking British and American expatriates that we find, for example, in *The Sun Also Rises*? Don’t they themselves constitute a community of which the Hemingway protagonist is a member? They do indeed, but what a special community it is! A brotherhood of the alienated—far away from home in a foreign land, and, more importantly, men and women who have crossed over some spiritual frontier and have left far behind the value system which was their native heritage. They have looked on the unveiled face of nothingness and have discovered that they must come to terms with it, each by his own strength—without the aid of
family, church, and the other traditional supports. They are survivors of a holocaust—the veterans, the initiates.

Or consider F. Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was a mid-Westerner and he allows Nick Carraway, the narrator of The Great Gatsby, himself a mid-Westerner, to express what are probably Fitzgerald's own personal views when he speaks rather feelingly of "my Middle West," and remarks that he and the other principal characters of the novel found themselves "subtly unadaptable to Eastern life." Nick testifies that the East has for him a certain "quality of distortion." But Fitzgerald, nevertheless, usually writes about the East, about Europe, or about Hollywood—that precinct dedicated to distortion. More important still, he writes about a very special breed of people, the very rich, who, as Fitzgerald once observed to Hemingway, are "not like the rest of us." Mind you, I am not trying to mark Fitzgerald down because of the material he used, or to give Faulkner extra points because, for the most part, he kept his characters at home. Rather, I am trying to define what I mean when I attribute to Faulkner a sense of community.

Sinclair Lewis did write about his own Middle West, and not always satirically. But Lewis, when he is interested in Main Street at all, is interested in it as a kind of lowest common denominator of American life. It is not so much wicked or vicious as simply negative. The task of the talented individual will be to try to build something on it, but in itself it has almost nothing to contribute. In short, I simply do not find in Gopher Prairie the organic quality evident in Faulkner's Jefferson, and the Gopher Prairieites, mere flat stereotypes, lack the individuality that one finds in I. O. Snopes or Manfred de Spain, or Henry Armstid, or Jason Compson. I do not know whether this deficiency lay in his home town, Sauk City, Minnesota, or whether Lewis simply failed to recognize what was in fact there. Whatever the explanation, however, there is lacking in Lewis's fictional world anything remotely resembling the sense of community that one discerns in the world of Faulkner. Jefferson is, for better or worse, vibrant with a life of its own; Gopher Prairie is merely a caricature of a town, a parcel of stereotypes, heaped together.

Consider a fourth instance, Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. It should prove an instructive one, for its subtitle reads, "A Group of Tales of Ohio Small-Town Life." It was, by the way, a book
that Faulkner knew well and admired, calling it Anderson's best work.

Does Anderson's Winesburg represent a community? I think not. Anderson's emphasis is not on a network of relationships that bind the inhabitants together into something like one corporate being. Instead, we are presented with what has to be regarded as a sheaf of case studies—I am not using the term here, by the way, in any derogatory sense—a sheaf of case studies of lonely, frustrated, and alienated people, who either are not understood or who at least feel themselves misunderstood, by their neighbors and fellow townspeople. Small wonder that, as one critic has put it, most of the Winesburg characters that Anderson writes about seek "release from their frustrations through violence or flight."

Anderson begins his book with a brief introductory section entitled "The Book of the Grotesque," and goes on to tell us that these grotesques, whose stories he is to relate, each had his version of truth—not the whole truth, but what he took to be the truth—and that it was the characters' clinging to their own individual truths that rendered them "grotesques." In short, each of these people had, as Anderson puts it elsewhere, "snatched up one of the truths" which were floating about and had become fixated upon it.

What Anderson is actually telling his reader is that Winesburg was not a community. For, as "community" has been defined earlier, the members of a community share a common truth, make much the same ethical judgments, live by the same codes, and move and have their being in the same basic cultural pattern.

This is my judgment of what Anderson is telling us about Winesburg in his brief introductory section. I am glad to note that Anderson's biographer, James Schevill, makes the same interpretation. I quote his comment upon these grotesques, each of whom exalts his individual truth: "But the truth cannot remain an individual's property," for if it does, "the feeling of the unity, the connection between man and society, is lost." Or, to convert Schevill's terms into those that I am using here, "the sense of community, is dissolved."

So much for Winesburg as a true community. Yet I can imagine some of you objecting: "All right, all right. But doesn't Faulkner also write about lonely and alienated people who feel that they are cut off from any community—who believe that the community is unwilling
to accept them?” Indeed, Faulkner does write about them. Some of his most interesting and tragic characters belong to this group. But it is a mistake to assume that a writer who has a strong sense of the importance of community is thereby locked into a monotonous affirmation of it or is oblivious to the fact that there are people excluded from it.

Quite the contrary. A concern for community implies a concern for the break with community—whether as a passive isolation from it or active rebellion against it. Since such a writer knows what community is, his notion of what its loss means is also clear. Alienation is not for him some vague malaise, a restlessness and general sense of emptiness. He also probably has a real understanding of the forces that erode the fact of community. Moreover, in presenting to his readers the anguish of his alienated characters, he has one great natural advantage: he can silhouette his alienated characters against the background of a community in being, with all the benefits of contrast and clear definition which such a background affords. In short, he can work, not with abstractions, but with concrete situations.

But it is high time for me now to begin to practice what I have just been preaching: that is, it behooves me to provide some concrete instances of these alleged advantages that Faulkner enjoys. Let me begin, then, with a fairly simple illustration: the way in which the community of Jefferson dealt with the Reverend Gail Hightower. From the very day of his arrival in Jefferson to become the new minister in the Presbyterian Church, Hightower speaks less like a moral and spiritual leader than like a horse trader happy over having made “an advantageous trade.” But the elders of the church are patient and long—suffering. They do not make any fuss about his rather odd sermons, full of imagery drawn from the Civil War, about gallantry and glorious deaths in cavalry charges. The congregation soon becomes disturbed, however, by the odd behavior of the minister’s wife, and later on, when “In the middle of the sermon, she sprang from the bench and began to scream, . . . shaking her hands toward the pulpit where the husband had ceased talking . . .” they are profoundly shocked. People try to restrain her, but she keeps “shaking her hands” at her husband or at God, until her husband comes down to her. “She stopped fighting then and he led her out,
with the heads turning as they passed, until the superintendent told the organist to play. That afternoon the elders held a meeting behind locked doors.”

A long—suffering congregation, I should call it, the members of which were concerned and surely sympathetic, but who were bewildered as well. The upshot is that the congregation made up a sum to send the wife to a sanatorium. Hightower continues to preach and, we are told, some of the women “who had not entered the parsonage in months, were kind to him, taking him dishes [of food] now and then, telling one another and their husbands what a mess the parsonage was in. . . .” All very human, but basically kindly. The congregation feels sympathetic toward its pastor and even toward his wife when she returns from the sanatorium to make a new start.

Once again, however, the minister’s wife stops coming to church, and finally there is a shocking scandal. She jumps or falls from a Memphis hotel window where she and another man had been registered as husband and wife. The city newspapers, of course, are full of it; and yet that very Sunday morning, Hightower enters his church as if nothing had happened and goes “up into the pulpit.” When he does so, “The ladies got up first and began to leave. Then the men got up too, and then the church was empty, save for the minister . . . and the Memphis [newspaper] reporters . . . sitting in a line up the rear pew.”

A somewhat similar incident occurred in a little Southern town in which I once lived. A prominent merchant had carried on an affair for years with the wife of another prominent citizen. When the affair finally became public, and the merchant had been duly divorced by his wife and his paramour had been divorced by her husband, the guilty pair, one Sunday morning, seated themselves in a church of a different denomination. The organist of the church that was being adopted at once jumped from the organist’s bench as if a firecracker had been exploded under her, and rushed out of the church of her fathers, slamming the door as she departed. How many of the rest of the congregation followed her, I do not know. The sinner was wealthy; large contributions could be expected from him; and that may have made it easier to practice the Christian virtue of forgiveness, though, to be sure, the merchant and his new consort did not enter the church as penitents.

Hightower’s congregation, however, was presented with some-
thing much harder to swallow, let alone digest. What his flock really
could not forgive was his intolerable breach of manners. To make
matters worse, on the next day Hightower insisted on conducting his
wife's burial service, and on the next Sunday, he was in his pulpit
again as if nothing had happened. Naturally, he was asked to resign.

If Hightower's congregation had consisted of saints, perhaps they
would, through an exercise of Christian agape, have understood and
forgiven their minister, ministering to him, discerning his fault—
that narcissistic incapacity to love anything except his conception of
his role. Or again, if his congregation had all been psychiatrists—
but then would any of them have been found attending a Presbyte-
rian church?—they might have set about the long process of effect-
ing a psychoanalytical cure. But Faulkner is dealing here with
people possessing no special spiritual vocation, no training in
psychiatry, and belonging to an old-fashioned and traditional soci-
ety. In any case, I am not primarily concerned with Hightower's
spiritual pride or his stunted psyche—you choose which term you
prefer—but with the idea of community. The persons in the con-
gregation are not simply a collection of disparate individuals, often
at odds with each other. In their attitudes and judgments they tend
to act as one body.

What happens later will provide further illustrations. When Hight-
tower is at last persuaded to resign, we are told at this news "the town
was sorry with being glad, as people sometimes are sorry for those
whom they have at last forced to do as they wanted." They are sorry,
and raise a collection to help Hightower get settled elsewhere, but
then are again outraged when they find that he has no intention of
leaving Jefferson. They let him know that they feel that he acted
dishonorably in accepting the money. But then when Hightower
offers to return it, the congregation, which has its own sense of
honor, scorns taking it back. Many people have now come to harbor
bitter feelings against this strange and obstinate man, and scandalo-
us stories about him begin to circulate. The upshot is that several of
the more ruffianly characters in the town order Hightower to fire his
black woman servant. Hightower refuses to dismiss her, but, con-
scious of such pressure, she resigns the job, and other black cooks
were presumably now afraid to work for the disgraced minister.

Finally, Hightower receives a note, signed "K.K.K.,” ordering him
to leave town by sunset, and when he does not go, he is abducted,
tied to a tree in the woods, “and beaten unconscious.” Nearly every close community has its lunatic fringe and individuals who do not stop at violence. But we jump to conclusions if we assume, as some people have, that Faulkner sees the Southern community as constituted of bigoted ruffians. In recounting the story of Hightower, the narrator of the story observes:

The town knew that [the beating of Hightower] was wrong, and some of the men came to him and tried to persuade him to leave Jefferson, for his own good, telling him that next time [the ruffians] might kill him. But he refused to leave. He would not even talk about the beating, even when they offered to prosecute the men who had done it [if he would divulge their names, but] he would neither tell nor depart. Then [the author tells us] all of a sudden the whole thing seemed to blow away, like an evil wind. It was as though the town realized at last that he would be a part of its life until he died, and that they might as well become reconciled.

The townspeople leave the minister alone and, a little later, since it is evident that he has to do his own cooking and housework, “the neighbors began to send him dishes again, though they were the sort of dishes which they would have sent to a poor mill family. But it was food, and well meant.”

I’ve been so detailed with this episode because it illustrates so much. In the first place, it dramatizes the general solidity of the community: there are some issues that do not have to be debated; many community reactions seem almost instinctive. On the other hand, the community is not one undifferentiated block; there are gradations in emphasis and accordingly in judgments about what to do; there are those whose feelings and reactions become violent, though most of the members of the community repudiate any brutal enforcement of the community’s will. Finally, one observes that the community is not locked into one doctrinaire attitude. The prevailing attitude toward Gail Hightower shifts from incomprehension to pity to outrage to slanderous bitterness to a revulsion from such bitterness to pity again, and finally to a kind of tolerant acceptance. In short, the members of the community are not ideologues who follow a party line or the behests of an executive committee. Instead, the community’s changing views resemble the changing attitudes of an individual who, though he can be driven to outrage and anger, is fundamentally decent and compassionate.
Let's turn to another novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* The Jefferson community in the 1830's or '40's was rather different from the Jefferson community seen a century later in *Light in August.* The earlier Jefferson was much closer to frontier days. The Indians had only recently departed and the blacks were still enslaved. Yet it is a true community and it does not radically differ from what it will become a century later.

How does it treat the mysterious outsider, Thomas Sutpen, who comes into Jefferson from God knows where, and who, because of his strange conduct, arouses the worst suspicions? The town, for example, speculates about Sutpen's wagonload of black slaves who speak some strange tongue that is not English, about his foreign-born architect, about his vast landholdings, and about how he obtained them.

They cannot make him out—why does he want to build a great mansion; why, having completed it, does he leave it unfurnished for some years; and perhaps most of all, why does he not look for a wife among the neighboring planter families but instead courts the elder daughter of a rather strait-laced storekeeper in the town?

When, after a three months' absence, he returns with four wagons loaded with household furnishings, one citizen of the little town exclaims: "Boy, this time he stole the whole durn steamboat!" The opinion is taken seriously; a posse gathers, and Sutpen is arrested. Note that he is arrested and arraigned. It is not a matter of a mob gathering and calling for a rope. But two of the town's most respectable citizens stand up for him—Mr. Coldfield, whose daughter Sutpen is courting, and General Compson, a prominent planter. They sign Sutpen's bond, and not long after, Sutpen is married to Ellen Coldfield.

The community, however, is still very suspicious of Sutpen. No more than a half dozen people, aside from General and Mrs. Compson and Mr. Coldfield and his sister-in-law, come into the little Methodist church to witness the wedding ceremony—and when the bride and groom emerge, the crowd that has gathered throw clods and vegetable refuse at Sutpen. We are told that this group consist of "the traders and drovers and teamsters." Yet, even they apparently intend no serious injury, and even from among this riff-raff a voice is heard to shout "Look out! Don't hit her now!" These ruffians, moreover, are transients. The stable folk of the community do not
throw anything or even jeer. They sit silently in their carriages though curiosity has brought them out as if "to see a Roman holiday."

Later, however, these people relax sufficiently to drive out to Sutpen's Hundred to pay calls, and the men to hunt his game. They also come out, from time to time, to watch Sutpen, having stripped to the waist, fight with his slaves.

They observe with wonder: his ways are clearly not their ways, but they are not blind to his virtues—his energy, his courage, his determination. His neighbors finally accept him, we are told, grudgingly, perhaps, with reservations, as a kind of licensed eccentric. Nevertheless, it is acceptance. In times of stress, they actually elect him colonel of the local regiment, ousting Colonel Sartoris to do so. But the author of the novel also makes it clear that Sutpen preserves his fierce independence and makes no concessions to the community: there is a specific reference to Sutpen's "utter disregard of how his actions" must appear to the town. We are told further that in the town Sutpen never had but one friend, General Compson. Even his father—in-law came to fear and distrust him.

How important is it for the reader to take note of Sutpen's real relation to the community? Very important, I should say. A real comprehension of this relationship would have prevented the printing of a good deal of nonsense—about the true springs of Sutpen's actions, about whether or not he is the heroic individual defying an essentially morbid society, or whether he is the very embodiment of that morbid society. The truth is that his relation to the community into which he has come is in fact very mixed and ambiguous. Accurate information on that point clarifies some of the basic themes of the novel.

But let me move to a simpler case. I've already noted that the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" is, though nameless, clearly a spokesman for the community, and surely his telling the story from the community's viewpoint implies that it had a meaning for that community. It is true that the narrator never spells out the meaning, but a sensitive reading of the story ought to be able to infer it. Miss Emily does possess the aristocratic virtues. Her proud independence and disregard for bureaucratic regulation elicits a certain admiration from the community itself—particularly as that community finds itself more and more pushed toward timid uniformity. But
Miss Emily's absolute defiance of what others think, and her insistence on meeting life solely on her own terms, ignoring custom, tradition, and law, can end in a horrifying deformation of her own psyche. The community learns how horrifying only after Miss Emily's death when the door of an upstairs bedroom is forced and the intruders discover what is left of the body of her lover of forty years before.

A refusal to knuckle under to the forms and actions expected by the community, need not, of course, be disastrous. But complete isolation from the community can lead to madness and murder. If, however, we subtract all such elements from Miss Emily's story, we pretty well reduce it to a clinical report in abnormal psychology—which is where a good many critics have left it. Yet, clearly, the feelings of the community toward Miss Emily are richly complicated. For the community, her story is no mere case history. It comes close to being a legend, a fable, even a parable.

Isolation from the community and its consequences figure powerfully in the story of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. If, as so many insist on doing, we make the primary theme of the novel race prejudice, we shall miss a great deal of the novel's richness and its bearing upon larger issues. We shall also oversimplify the plight of Joe Christmas himself. For Joe lives not merely in a state of defiance of the white community. He repudiates the black community too. He has no difficulty in passing for a white man, and there is no hard evidence in the novel that he possesses any Negro genes whatsoever. But Joe finds himself at home neither in the white world nor the black. Joe has in fact tried to live both as a white man and as a black. Neither works for him. Instead, he finds himself a man suspended between the two, bereft of any community. Joe's sense of unrest and homelessness, the reasons for which Faulkner articulates so carefully, is not a matter of his genes at all, but of a warped psyche. In this general matter he resembles Gail Hightower and Emily Grierson, and Faulkner has told Joe's story, like theirs, against the background of a vital community—not, let me repeat, a model community, not a community of saints or of happily adjusted liberal sociologists, but a group of people who share customs, beliefs, and social rituals—a community, in short, that provides a contrasting backdrop for the sometimes heroic but always lonely and often disastrous life of each of these spiritually lost souls.
The community in Faulkner, however, is more than a mere backdrop to the individual's lonely struggle, and the pressure it exerts upon the individual does not necessarily end in disaster. I have time, however, for only one example of what I mean. It has to do with the coming to maturity of young Bayard Sartoris as told in *The Unvanquished*. The culminating incident, to which I shall confine myself, is recounted in the final section of the novel, which is entitled "An Odor of Verbena."

Bayard is away at law school when Ringo, his black companion from childhood days, rides into Oxford to tell Bayard that Colonel Sartoris, his father, has been shot down on the streets of Jefferson by Ben Redmond, a former business partner with whom he has been feuding. The time of the story is the 1870's. The Civil War has ended only a decade earlier and the difficult Reconstruction period is just drawing to an end.

Ringo expects that Bayard will call his father's assassin to account. So does George Wyatt, who had served in Colonel Sartoris's cavalry troop. So does even the rather gentle law professor with whom Bayard is reading law. As Bayard prepares to hurry back to Jefferson, Professor Wilkins significantly offers to lend Bayard not only a horse, but a pistol. When he gets home, Bayard finds his young stepmother, Drusilla, not dressed in widow's weeds, but in a yellow ball gown. In a silvery voice, pitched almost at the intensity of hysteria, she insists on putting the dueling pistols into his very hands. Indeed, almost the only person in the community—at least of all those whom we hear speak in the novel—almost the only person who begs Bayard not to avenge his father's death is Bayard's Aunt Jenny Dupre.

Bayard, however, has already decided not to try to kill Redmond. His motives are complex—those of you who have read the story are aware of just how complex. But it may be well to recall some of the more important experiences that went into his decision. First, he has already had to kill one man in order to avenge his grandmother, who has been murdered by a bushwhacker. Next, though Bayard loves his father, he has become thoroughly conscious of how hard, ruthless, and insensitive his father has lately become. Colonel Sartoris has had to kill too many men. He has too avidly sought power. He has pressed his opponent Redmond too hard. Even George Wyatt, that zealous admirer of the Colonel, admits that.
Bayard's cousin and stepmother, Drusilla, had lost her fiancé during the War, and under family pressure, had made a loveless marriage with the Colonel, a much older man. She is now half in love with her stepson and passionately in love with what is for Faulkner an essentially masculine concept—that of the code of honor.

Yet, though Bayard has evidently resolved never again to take a human life, the pressures on him are tremendous. He acknowledges as much when Aunt Jenny tells him not to go into town the next morning to kill or be killed. She begs him not to allow himself to be forced into such a confrontation by "Drusilla, a poor hysterical young woman," or by "George Wyatt and those others who will be waiting for you." He does not, she tells him, need to prove his courage. "I know that you are not afraid." To which Bayard replies: "I must live with myself, you see." The next morning, before he goes into town, he tells Aunt Jenny, with pointed reference to the community's demands upon him, "You see, I want to be thought well of."

Bayard respects the community's claims upon him even where he disagrees with the rightness of those claims. Actually, Bayard finds a way to honor both the claims of the community and his own promise to himself not to kill again. His expedient, however, involves a desperate act of courage. He enters Redmond's law office unarmed. As he opens the door, Redmond, seated at his desk, fires two shots, but deliberately points his pistol away from Bayard. Redmond, too, is a brave man, as George Wyatt had insisted he was, and he clearly is also a man of honor. Though, because of extreme provocation he has killed the father, he has resolved not to kill the innocent son. Like Bayard, he has expected to be shot and killed.

In teaching this story, I have frequently had to clear up a serious misapprehension. Students who have a contempt for what they take to be a barbarous and backward community, have difficulty seeing Bayard's problem. How could it ever have occurred to him to think of killing Redmond? A sensible man would simply have turned matters over to the district attorney and perhaps hired some extra counsel to back up the prosecution, but certainly not risked his own life in a foolhardy gesture of outmoded gallantry. Of course, it would never occur to these same students to apply such reasoning to Shakespeare's Hamlet. The application of such modern standards and attitudes would destroy not only an appreciation of Hamlet, but of The Iliad, Oedipus Rex, The Song of Roland, not to mention other
Sense of Community

classics. Yes, someone says, but The Unvanquished is different: it’s about modern America.

But, of course, it is not about modern America. North Mississippi a century ago was a very different world from that of modern America. An important difference is its strong sense of community and of a community of a special kind, characterized by powerful family and clan loyalties, by an almost quixotic code of personal honor, and by a cult of physical and moral bravery.

In short, if we are to grasp the full quality of Bayard’s moral heroism, we have to understand the power of the force that he had to resist. Indeed, we cannot do justice to any of the characters—Drusilla, Colonel Sartoris, George Wyatt, or even Redmond unless we know what the issues were for them.

One final item about the Yoknapatawpha community. I have pointed out that it is not monolithic, and I would now point out further that it is not petrified into rigidity. When George Wyatt, the somewhat illiterate man of yeoman stock, grasps what Bayard has done, he says “You walked in . . . without even a pocket knife and let him miss you twice. My God in heaven,” and then he shouts to one of the men to ride out to Sartoris and “tell his folks that it’s all over and he’s all right.” But Wyatt goes on to tell Bayard, “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. But that’s your way or you wouldn’t have done it.”

So even Waytt accepts Bayard’s transcendence of the older code; and so does even Drusilla, whom Faulkner has described as “the priestess of a succinct and formal violence.” She has gone away, presumably never to return. But when Bayard goes into his room that evening, he finds on his pillow a sprig of verbena, obviously left for him by Drusilla, and he knows why she has left it: to tell him that she too acknowledges and accepts the heroism of his action. Verbena was, for her, the very emblem of courage: it was the one odor alone, she said, that “you could smell . . . above the smell of horses.”