

Naturalism and Symbolism in the Work of William Faulkner

by Robert A. Jelliffe

To any conscientious reader of William Faulkner's novels (and of his short stories too, for that matter) it soon becomes apparent that one needs to be equipped with bi-focal vision. A simple, straightforward perusal is not enough. In his writing, much more is meant than meets the eye. On one level of meaning, to change the figure, the characters in the story and the story itself appear to concern themselves with a tortured and macabre representation of life redeemed, to some small extent, by the inclusion of an occasional normal and even benevolent human being and by the author's compassionate concern for poor, overburdened, frustrate humanity. On another level, a deeper one, the characters and the story itself, both of themselves and in combination with each other, make the reader aware of some allegorical meaning shadowed forth by implication, a meaning to be read between the lines. To become fully and simultaneously aware of these different levels of meaning, to secure the requisite three-dimensional comprehension of these stories, the reader must make use of a stereoscopic consideration of them. He must bring their separate angles of vision into a common focus.

This is merely to say that Faulkner's writing is less easily classified than that of many another author. It is extremely complex, not simple. We might say of one writer, sufficiently, that he employs the literary method we have come to regard as naturalistic. Of another, we might say that in both method and intent his work is allegorical. Such verdicts would always need some discrimination and qualification, to be sure. By themselves they would be altogether too pat to do full justice to any significant piece of literature. But they might serve, even so, to indicate a general tendency. In Faulkner's work, however, it becomes obligatory at the outset to

recognize and acknowledge the presence of both these traits in conjunction. And it is this double quality in his art, this presence at once of the naturalistic representation of life and of the allegorical, the symbolistic, that makes his writing so strikingly individual. It sets him apart from his compeers.

Let us attempt to examine this twofold quality in his work, analyzing it, perforce, one characteristic at a time, to begin with, and then, afterwards, appraising the combined result. Only so, it would seem, may we hope to define and estimate the unique product of his exceptional genius.

I

In making such an examination as this we may logically follow the normal order of impression that a reader would naturally follow. To begin with, that is to say, he would be made acutely aware, even painfully so, of the particular story he was reading as a story. It would be the narrative itself, the harrowing, shocking chronicle of events in "Sanctuary," for example, or in "The Sound and the Fury," or in any of the others. And he would be led first of all to appraise the worth of the story as such, to investigate its method of procedure, to evaluate its representation of life, to ascertain what view of the world the author was possessed by - in a word, to regard the story on the level of its narrative of events and of the lives of the human beings who animated those events.

In doing so, in taking the story at its face value, so to speak, we should probably have recourse to one or another of the critical terms that afford a convenient classification of literary methods. We might well begin our analysis of one of these novels, to be specific, by observing that our author has availed himself of the procedure that has come to be called the naturalistic.

For it is helpful at the outset, in essaying to appraise the work of one writer or nother, to assign him to one of the main categories that literary criticism has ordained. It helps us to "place" a novelist, for instance, it helps us to approach his work with more complete

understanding, if we may think of him initially as a romantic artist or a realistic one or a naturalistic one. These are convenient terms, of assistance in making the necessary discriminations that lead to a more exact definition of a writer's purpose, his method, his result. These terms are helpful, we may insist, even though there is no unanimous agreement as to their precise meaning and no guarantee that any given writer will conform consistently to the category to which he may have been assigned. All that can properly be asked of this preliminary critical screening is that it may serve to effect a rough classification of a writer's code and creed as an artist, a classification that indicates the distinction between the work of a Thornton Wilder, for instance, and that of an Ernest Hemingway or a Thomas Wolfe.

So perhaps it might be wise to indicate here and now in what sense exactly these critical terms are to be employed in the following discussion. If we may come to some initial agreement as to the definition of the terms themselves, the application of one or another of them to the writer under consideration should not arouse too much question or controversy. The writer under present consideration is William Faulkner. The critical designation here to be applied to him is that of psychological naturalist. It behooves us, therefore, if the term is to be regarded as appropriate, to define it.

Let it be said at the outset that whatever literary method a writer employs will have its origin and warrant in his individual attitude toward life. There will be a close correspondence between his outlook on the world and his artistic representation of men and manners. For no artist is so willfully artificial and perverse as to run counter to his philosophy in what he creates: it would be next to impossible for him to do so. Discover what procedure a novelist submits to, therefore, and you have discovered his view of life itself. The one is inextricably bound up in the other, The romantic artist is convinced that there are human values in life, values that are peculiar to mankind; and he is further persuaded that some of these values are more admirable than others. They are the ones he chooses to emphasize in his work. He extols, for example,

courage, loyalty, steadfastness - in a word, he emphasizes whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. His vision of life requires him to do so. As a result, his novels (if he is a writer) will tend to idealize human motive and human experience. They will minimize the crude, the base, the ugly in human behavior. They may tend to sentimentalize the truth of life, giving a partial though pleasing representation of experience; but they will give the truth as he sees it.

The truth as he sees it is also the intent of the realistic artist. He finds himself in agreement with the romanticist to the extent that he also believes that there are distinctively human values in life; but he feels obligated as an artist to tell the whole truth, not merely one part of it, as he regards the romantic artist as doing. He is less partial, less selective. All aspects of life, the grim as well as the charming, the sordid as well as the gracious, become subject to his delineation. He will not shrink from portraying the drab as well as the splendid.

Unfortunately for his commendable theory - that of telling the whole truth - his practice has frequently led him to overstress the sordid at the expense of the ideal. So fearful has he been of glozing over what is unpleasant and unlovely, that he has tended to lean over backwards to avoid doing so. The result is all too often a portrayal of life just as one-sided, just as prejudiced, as the romantic version. In fact, the term realistic has come to connote an uncompromising exposé of the dingy and the malodorous, a grubbing amidst the sunless corners of life. The truth at any cost - so declares the realistic artist. In effect, frequently, he ignores the alleviating grace in life of what is equally true of human existence - the charming, the ideal, the captivating.

In strenuous opposition to both the romantic and the realistic vision of life stands the naturalistic. Man is a creature of nature, so this type of writer asserts, and it is therefore illogical to suppose that he is possessed of attributes other than those of all of nature's other creatures. It is idle, further-more, to imagine him as cherishing values

that are peculiarly and distinctively human. Let us be honest and courageous enough to regard him as subject to the same laws, responsive to the same impulses, as those which control the behavior and the activities of all the other members of nature's kingdom. In Nature there is neither right nor wrong, good nor bad - the moral standards introduced into the pattern of life simply do not hold water. They are irrelevant. So runs the creed of the naturalistic artist.

Naturalism has sometimes been referred to as pessimistic realism, since it makes use of much the same raw material that realism employs but colors that material with the dark hue of a pessimistic philosophy. But this description overlooks the fact that realism, strictly speaking, endeavors to remain strictly objective, impersonal. Naturalism is not so much an intensification of realism, properly speaking. It is rather a law, a view of life, a method of literature, all its own. At its core is a denial of the doctrine of free will: man is *not* the arbiter of his fate, however stoutly such a poet as Henley, that arch-romantic, may maintain that he is. The naturalistic writer denies it. Man, so he believes, is buffeted by forces in the world or within himself than are greater far than his own will. He may struggle against those forces, but he is foreordained to defeat - or else, even if he should seem to be successful in the maelstrom of life, his seeming victory comes about through circumstances over which he himself has no control. Even this questionable success may be short-lived and may as suddenly desert him. Such an interpretation of man's life does indeed involve a philosophy of pessimism, a retreat into the quicksands of determinism.

The principle of determinism in life is one that the naturalistic writer accepts. Man's actions, so he is predisposed to believe, are determined for him, not by him. Forces beyond his control govern his career. But the modern writer is no Calvinist: he does not believe that these determining forces are of divine origin. He is much more inclined to believe that the nature of the forces that govern man's life is either biological, mechanistic, or fatalistic. If they are biological, then man's actions are determined by his heredity and his

environment. If they are mechanistic, if all physical and intellectual life is the result of mechanical forces, then man's activities are to be explained in terms of physics and chemistry. And if the all-powerful forces are fate, or mere chance, then man is at the mercy of the caprice of circumstance.

Broadly speaking, we may say that in twentieth century American fiction the prevailing literary mode, the literary method most prominently displayed, has been the naturalistic. It has superseded both the romantic and the realistic. And we may say further that since the days of World War I the naturalistic method has tended to shift from physical naturalism to psychological naturalism. The earlier naturalism was based on the physical circumstances of man's life: his environment, his social, economic, political background. The new naturalism has become psychological: the determining force in man's life is to be found within himself.

Twentieth century psychology conceives of man as a mechanism, like other mechanisms: a machine concocted of ducts and glands, of suppressed desires, of deeply hidden impulses far beyond the unhappy individual's control. They control him. The thought of the twentieth century has been largely dominated by science; and of all this new scientific influence, the most powerful has probably been that of modern psychology. It has prepared American thinking for the favorable reception of a naturalistic philosophy that embodies this view of life, a view of life that was inevitably to find expression in a corresponding type of literature. It was psychology that prepared the way; World War I accelerated and intensified the process.

As representative of this type of writing might be cited the novels of Theodore Dreiser, the plays of Eugene O'Neill, the stories of Sherwood Anderson. In the work of such American authors as these there is evident a strong tendency to make use of "grotesques" rather than of normal or well balanced characters. Indeed, Sherwood Anderson has deliberately assigned to his volume of stories entitled "Winesburg, Ohio" the sub-title "A Book of Grotesques." A "grotesque," so understood, is an individual so warped or distorted that he becomes a

mere caricature of himself. Some one trait of his make-up has been magnified into the dimension of his entire personality. To this extent he bears some resemblance to the "humour" characters of Ben Jonson's day.

II

William Faulkner, in his turn, has made use of this type of character on occasion and has availed himself, in general, of the method and the manner of naturalism. How else are we to characterize or explain such blood-chilling stories as "Sanctuary," "Light in August," "The Sound and the Fury," "As I Lay Dying"? Let us look at one or two of these novels from this point of view. "Sanctuary" may lead the list.

The villain of the piece is called Popeye, a "grotesque," certainly. Degenerate, syphilitic, impotent, he brings about the ruin of the college girl, Temple Drake, and some time later, arrested for a murder he had not committed, he was hanged. Associated with him in a gang of moonshiners were: a sightless old man, senile and repulsive; a feeble-minded hulk of humanity called Tommy, later to be shot to death by Popeye; a vicious individual named Van; and a slatternly woman, the common-law wife of the leader of the group, Lee Goodwin, who was himself a fugitive from justice. All of them were holed up in an abandoned, sepulchral house in the wood. Horace Benbow, a middle-aged lawyer, well intentioned but weak, had been shanghaied to this hide-out of degenerates by Popeye. Benbow might be regarded as the normal human being, in contrast to whom all these others, these "grotesques," reveal their warped and twisted natures all the more violently. They all live their lives in dreadful servitude to their respective natures. Their behavior is foreordained. The reader's flesh creeps as he comes into association with them.

The story itself, as one might well expect from such *dramatis personae*, is sensational to the point of being horrifying. The author has confessed in a preface to the book that he wrote it with the

deliberate intention of shocking the reader. He succeeded. He shocked so great a number of readers, fascinated, hypnotized, by the sequence of scenes of rape, murder, insanity, and lynching, that he became able, on the proceeds of the sale of the book, to establish himself and his family in an ante-bellum house in his home town and to devote himself, thereafter, to the writing of whatever sort of stories and characters he might choose.

He chose, as we were soon to discover, to devote himself to the writing of many another macabre tale, not quite so crude, perhaps, not quite so shocking, as "Sanctuary," but treating, even so, of the dark and tortured situations in life; and to the delineation of many more characters who in their innermost natures were twisted into actions perverse, fanatic, sadistic. A gallery of subjects fit for a clinic in abnormal psychology, ready for psychiatric treatment more often than not, people the pages of most of these later books.

Such a character, to single out one from many, is Joe Christmas, of "Light in August." Of illegitimate birth, abandoned in infancy, persecuted in childhood because of a suspected taint of negro blood, sternly repressed during adolescence, he grew into embittered and vengeful manhood. A sex-thwarted spinster became his paramour; and when, frantic with remorse, she strove to force him to pray with her for forgiveness, and when, on his refusal to do so, she tried to shoot him, he turned on her in frenzy and cut off her head with his razor.

In the same book we encounter many another "grotesque": Hightower, the minister excommunicated by his church; the bigoted man who ruled the boy with a rod of iron and caused him to revolt; the boy's grandfather, stern, implacable; and many more.

To offset these distorted beings we do find certain others, to be sure, though they are in the minority. We find Lena Grove and the man who protects her and loves her, Byron Bunch. They are sufficient, in themselves, to restore our belief, brutally wrenched into a world of the fantastically vicious, to restore our belief in a world of

human uprightness and decency. And the story concludes, after Joe Christmas, making no effort to escape capture, was shot to death and made to suffer the final torture and outrage of being castrated as he lay dying, riddled with bullets - the story concludes with Lena Grove and Byron Bunch and the baby she had come so far to bear being given a ride across the northern border of the state into Tennessee. "My, my," she said. "A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it's already Tennessee." She might almost have been saying, "Here we are in Paradise."

Let these two stories suffice as typical examples of the literary method Faulkner has employed in his work, the method of naturalism. To this extent he might well be classed with other exponents of the same general procedure, with Dreiser and Anderson and many another of these modern times. To this extent they all may seem to have much the same outlook on life: the same conviction that freedom of the human will is an illusion, not validated by experience; that a man's life is conditioned by genes and glands and subconscious urges; that there are determining forces within him and without, forces that control his destiny.

III

But even a superficial reading of Faulkner's stories makes us aware that his literary method, his outlook on life, is not nearly so simple, so single, as this. His work is decidedly complicated. His writing is unique in treatment as well as in style. It becomes essential, therefore, to examine another strand in the fabric of his work: his symbolism. For Faulkner has succeeded in being at one and the same time a practitioner of the method of naturalism and of that of symbolism. It is the combination of these two strands in his writing that produces so singular and fascinating a representation of experience.

We must turn, then, to this second element in his writing, this

tendency to make use of symbol as regards both character and fable, to allegorize the story, to the end of giving the work extra dimension and meaning. This tendency, so we discover, creates not merely a third dimension, as in so-called 3-D movies, but seemingly a fourth. In these stories the individual human beings become not merely completely rounded persons, living an individual life of their own, but they take on an extra dimension of meaningfulness. They are projected from the status of individual importance into that of universal significance.

It is not at all uncommon for us to perceive in the characters of literary figures of any age this larger-than-life element. Probably every important individual in a play or in a novel of any distinction possesses some of this quality of symbol in addition to his quality as a specific human being. Prince Hamlet possesses this quality in large measure. As Shakespeare conceived him, he is a veritable person, the young Prince of Denmark, unique, recognizable as the glass of fashion of his age, as the highly cultivated, gracious, unduly sensitive young man. We come to know him better and in more varied aspects of his nature than we know many of our living acquaintances. There is no least doubt as to his individuality. We accord him, as to a particular person, our sympathetic admiration. We suffer with him when he is beset by the grievous necessity of avenging his father's murder. It is an obligation - so he feels, and so, therefore, do we - too grave for his ultra-sensitive nature to cope with. We grieve for his untimely death. Hamlet is vitally, distinctively human.

He is at the same time, quite obviously, a symbol. He is the incarnation of the element of good in timeless conflict with the powers of evil. He is the figure who carries the hope of the world in the endless struggle between right and wrong. As we watch him, he becomes heroic, magnificent. His mortality is conjoined with grandeur. August, triumphant, his death is swallowed up in victory.

But Shakespeare, we feel, was more concerned with the Hamlet who took his heart-broken leave of Ophelia, who revered his father, who idolized his mother, than he was with the Hamlet who personified

the operation of the moral law in the universe. The symbolic meaning is there, but only as an inevitable projection of the complete truth to life of the character himself. Hamlet as symbol is merely the by-product of Hamlet as human being.

So is it, in varying degrees, with the characters of all stories that undertake to be utterly true to life. The symbol-value is present, but it is largely unpremeditated, not deliberate.

With Faulkner, however, I must believe that the opposite is true. He is a symbolist at heart, both in his initial conception of story and character as well as in his manner of expression. As regards the latter of these attributes of his work, the style of expression, his symbolistic technique is distinctly reminiscent of the writing of such French symbolists as Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud. In both treatment and conception, that is to say, his work belongs in this category. He is as much given to writing in this symbolist manner, in prose, as T. S. Eliot was, in his earlier work, in poetry. And this manner of his must needs be taken into account if we are rightly to understand and appraise his work.

He wrote in this vein not because of some theory of art to which he subscribed but because it was in this fashion, fundamentally, that he looked out on life. The French symbolists, as well as their English and American followers, worked according to a deliberately contrived program. They were in revolt against what they regarded as the excesses of their predecessors. They strove, through the employment of symbol, to communicate the nuances of mood, the most evanescent shades of feeling. The result was all too often vague and almost indecipherable; but at least it opposed the stark limitations of realism. With its devotees, the method became an initiation into a cult, an aesthetic distinction.

With Faulkner (who unquestionably was acquainted with this new direction of poetry) it became from the first not merely a manner, not an artistic mannerism, but an expression of his vision of reality. He saw life neither steadily nor as a whole; he saw it on two planes simultaneously, he saw it in double perspective. And only after he

had given expression to this twofold examination of life would the disparate views coalesce and become one image; only then would the two-dimensional representation of human experience be transmuted, by the alchemy of his art, into a unified interpretation.

It is no wonder that Faulkner's prose style so often proves difficult to comprehend. Far from being deliberately obscure, he is attempting to employ prose in a service to which it has seldom before been subjugated. His style of expression labors to communicate those matters of mood and meaning that have strained language to the breaking point. If style, in one sense, is the man, in another sense it is also the subject. And here is a man of almost demonic insight into the mysteries of disordered human passion endeavoring to make articulate through a medium of expression as recalcitrant as language an account of human experience as observed through the double vision with which he was endowed. No wonder he has had recourse to symbolism. No wonder his style, as a result, frequently mystifies the reader. Symbolism always runs the danger, because of an inevitable ambiguity (of a seven-fold ambiguity, it may be), of becoming cryptic.

We must not be led astray, however, into any extended examination of Faulkner's style. That is another story, a fascinating and valuable one. Our immediate concern is rather with the method used by our author, and with the result. It is in these connections that we may give our attention to his claim to be considered as a symbolistic artist. It is this way of viewing life, other than the way of the naturalistic artist, that we must now examine.

To do so, we might most profitably turn back to a re-examination of those very novels we have already discussed, to discover in what new way they may be regarded. And so, to begin with, let us look again at "Sanctuary."

The story is far more than a Grand Guignol shocker, far more than the "cheap idea" that Faulkner himself professed to think it was. It has deeper implications than appear on the surface. The title is not nearly so cynically perverse, so blasphemously ironic, as at first it might seem. The girl's name, Temple, with its associative meanings

of all that is holy, is found to be less fantastically incongruous that at first it might appear. There is a sense, indeed, in which the whole story takes on the significance of a tragic allegory of life - more specifically, of the rape and corruption of Faulkner's southland. Whatever may be the factual warrant for his idea and his idealization of the South, for his brooding concern over the apparent decline and fall of that "nation," there can be no doubt that he idolized it. And in many of his stories, "Sanctuary" for one, he is forever seeking and finding some image or other, some symbol, to convey to us his sense of outrage and despair at what has taken place.

So it becomes increasingly clear to us, as we read, that Popeye, the creature of evil in the story, may be interpreted as the symbol of all that has invaded and ravaged the deep South - all that hateful mechanical, dehumanized civilization, it might be, that is accountable for the decay and degeneration of the homeland. Popeye, as Faulkner stigmatizes him, "made money and had nothing he could do with it, spend it for, since he knew that alcohol would kill him like poison, who had no friends and had never known a woman."

But there was a blight on the South, a canker at the core: it was slavery. Temple Drake was violated and debauched. The abode of the spirit, the edifice of holiness, was pillaged in sacrilegious fashion. Violence was done upon it. But even before it suffered such profanation it had been employed in profligate services. Temple Drake was the sort of girl whose name would be scrawled on the walls of a privy.

Just one year after the publication of "Sanctuary", Faulkner brought out another of his stories of the South, "Light in August" (1932). Of this novel also, as with the earlier one, it becomes apparent that the significance must be found in its implications. The story has allegorical dimensions. The method is that of symbolism. In none of these stories, however, is the allegory to be analyzed too systematically, too minutely. The two elements exist together, the story and the allegory fuse and become one.

Joe Christmas, the villain, is seen as a pawn on the dreadful chessboard of human life, a pawn moved at random, it might seem, by spectral hands, by fate, by environment and heredity and circumstance. His very name, moreover, would lead us to reflect that his doom was sealed one Christmas day. He was shot down at the same age that Christ had attained when he was crucified. His uncertain paternity, the virginity of his mother, the frequent references to ideas of blood and sacrifice and crucifixion - all these things have led one critic (Richard Rovere) to believe that in Faulkner's mind, when he began the story, there must have been a connection of some sort between Joe Christmas, the character of the story, and Jesus Christ. "What the connection might have been," the critic admits, "I am unable to imagine. . . . But although it seems indisputable to me that some sort of connection was in Faulkner's mind . . . I cannot believe that there is much profit . . . in exploring the matter very deeply or in using it to interpret the novel." Not to interpret it, we may agree; but at least to recognize the constant tendency on the part of our author to adumbrate his more subtle meanings by the use of symbol.

Richard Rovere might have been even more fully convinced of this connection in Faulkner's mind between his leading character and Jesus Christ if he had waited to write his report until after he had read "A Fable." In that story, quite deliberately, quite openly, the author has drawn an allegorical analogy between the corporal who foments a mutiny on the field of battle and the person of Christ himself. Quite possibly, therefore, Faulkner may well have come back to this idea that was latent in his mind, in vague fashion, when he wrote "Light in August." In "A Fable" he has given it much more definiteness.

Thus it may be possible, for the sake of analysis, to disentangle the separate strands of meaning that give significance and value to Faulkner's work. It is possible, moreover, and convenient, to give accredited critical terms, such as naturalistic and symbolistic, to the

methods by which these strands have been fashioned. But to do so is still to fall far short of accounting for the marvel of composition that results in such a work of art as one or another of these stories. That marvel will forever elude our most painstaking scrutiny. It is well it should. We do well, even so, to look as closely as we may at such workmanship as this, if only to the end that we may more clearly comprehend the art and artistry of the man and so more intelligently appreciate what he has done.

