

**Zeitschrift:** Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne  
**Herausgeber:** Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres  
**Band:** 2 (1979)  
**Heft:** 1

**Artikel:** Faulkner's Sanctuary : between the indignation and the surprise  
**Autor:** Schroeter, James  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870896>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 14.09.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

FAULKNER'S *SANCTUARY*:  
BETWEEN THE INDIGNATION AND THE SURPRISE

Placed beside Faulkner's other first-rate novels, *Sanctuary* stands as the anomaly, the one which does not quite fit, and from which the critical labels keep peeling. The least "Southern" of his major books and perhaps the only one which does not rely on what Allen Tate has called Faulkner's "Legend of the South," it was first interpreted by George M. O'Donnell as an allegory in which Popeye, "amoral modernity," rapes Temple Drake, the symbol of Southern womanhood. Written in reaction to popular culture and as a parody of tabloid newspaper stories, cartoons and gangster movies, it was, and still remains, Faulkner's only really popular book. Violently anti-romantic, it was filmed as a conventional romance; and Lawrance Thompson, one of the few Faulkner critics to take the book seriously, regards it as a love story, "a montage of love stories, arranged in a counterpoint pattern." Among the more wildly fantastic of Faulkner's stories, it is his only major attempt to deal realistically, without benefit of myth, with American modernity. More abstract, compressed, schematized and intellectually nervous than most of the rest of his novels, it has usually not appealed at all to critics, scholars and intellectuals.

The critics who have seriously tried to give a reading of the novel do not agree at all about its value or even its subject matter, although Faulkner himself, when he decided to call it "Sanctuary," apparently wanted to point in the right direction. As a number of critics have noted, there are, however, a great many "sanctuaries" in the novel. There is the brothel, a sanctuary, in an ironic sense, for Temple; there is Narcissa's home, a sanctuary, in an ironic sense, for Benbow; there is Frenchman's Bend, its house, barn and wilderness, sanctuaries in a number of different ironic senses, for the Goodwins, Popeye, Temple, Benbow, Gowan. None of these in itself takes one very far into the novel. But Faulkner seems to have arranged them all into a pattern, and it is the

pattern which points in the right direction, giving thematic firmness to the novel as a whole.

One notes that all of the sanctuaries form parodies in one way or another of ideal domesticity. Frenchman's Bend, the half ruined place in which the central event in the novel takes place, harbors a number of these non-family-like families. The original inhabitants, Tommy and his father, are apparently a broken remnant of what had at one time been a family, perhaps the poor-whites who farmed the place before it was taken over as a hideout by Lee Goodwin and his "woman". Bare-footed, semi-articulate, his blond hair "foul and matted", Tommy, the son, is a moron, unable to read and write, without sexual characteristics, who does not know his own age or history. The father, who is very old and walks with a cane, is blind and deaf. Faulkner describes him as a "short man with a full-fleshed rosy face in which his cataracted eyes looked like two clots of phlegm." Benbow, from whose point of view much of the novel is told, watches him take "a filthy rag from his pocket and regurgitate into the rag an almost colorless wad of what had once been chewing tobacco and fold the rag and put it into his pocket". When he eats, he "fumbles" with his plate, finds a piece of meat. "sucks" it until they finally take it away from him. They cut it up — bread, meat and all — and pour sorghum over it; after that, "Benbow quit looking". There is no reference at all to the woman, whoever she was, who had been wife to the old man and mother to Tommy. Without her, the family — or broken parody of a family — is without cleanliness, order, amenity, manners or any of those qualities which go to make up domesticity in the civilized sense.

The other "family" on the place, the Goodwins, includes a female, Ruby — referred to simply as "Goodwin's woman". Dressed in a shapeless dress and her husband's cast-off brogans, she does all of the work on the place — the cooking, serving, washing and cleaning. Although surrounded by a society of males, she also does the heavy man's work — chopping wood, fetching water from the spring. Unlike the sexless Tommy and his father, Goodwin himself is strong, masterful and virile. An ex-convict and murderer, he is also violent. When Ruby, trying to exert her non-existent rights as a woman, suspects him of having played around with Temple, he "gripped her arm slowly", and "with scarcely any perceptible motion at all flung her aside in a complete revolution". Unsubdued, she strikes at him with a butcher knife. "He caught her wrist", plucked the baby from her so that it would not be hurt,

"caught her other hand as it flicked at his face, and holding both wrists in one hand, he slapped her. It made a dry, flat sound. 'That's what I do to them,' he said, slapping her. 'See?'" Perhaps a reminder of the ideal family we never see, the baby appears in nearly every scene. For some reason Faulkner never explains, it is sickly, on the point of death. Whimpering, "it shows lead-colored eyeballs".

Popeye and his henchmen, who come to Frenchman's Bend to buy Goodwin's moonshine for the syndicate, are an antithesis rather than a parody of domesticity. Like Goodwin, they are violent, lawless men, but their violence is not associated, as his is, with manliness or virility. Denatured and emotionless, it is associated with machines, automatic pistols, high-speed autos, emptiness. A male society without any fixed place to live and permanently without women, they regard Temple simply as an object to be played with or raped, and Ruby as a slave to do their chores.

These three "families" coexist temporarily and unstably at Frenchman's Bend, Tommy and his father docilely under the domination of Goodwin; Goodwin and his woman, although struggling hard to stay independent, under the domination of Popeye. A violent, ungoverned male world at war, cut off from law and convention, Frenchman's Bend forms half of Faulkner's parody of domesticity and contemporary civilization.

The opposite half is the world of Jefferson. Partly an outlaw world, Frenchman's Bend is also the natural green world. Jefferson, by contrast, at least in *Sanctuary*, seems quasi-institutional, heavily legalistic. There is the inhospitable hotel, which throws Ruby into the streets; the jail house which imprisons an unnamed Negro and a man wrongfully charged with murder; the courthouse where perjury is committed and justice perverted; the town square where the lynch mob, waving torches, gathers to do murder in the name of public morality. These also function as mock sanctuaries, especially the hotel, and the jail house, which fails to protect Goodwin from the lynch mob.

Faulkner also draws a number of female-dominated households stifled by over-refinement, decorum or narrow conventionality. The most important, located just outside of Jefferson, is the home of Narcissa, Horace Benbow's sister. The reader sees, from time to time, a number of males hanging around the house — Narcissa's ten-year-old son, Boris, whom we do not hear speak and whose personality does not emerge, and the obedient black



chauffeur, who runs Narcissa's errands. In one scene, the initial one, there is also a visit from Gowan, the "Virginia gentleman". Narcissa is a young widow, and Gowan, who comes to court her, is made by Faulkner to speak a good many silly, empty Southern ideals. But the household itself, entirely unaffected by any male influence, is run by two females, Narcissa and "Miss Jenny", an old Southern gentlewoman in her nineties. Narcissa herself lives a life "of serene vegetation like perpetual corn or wheat in a sheltered garden", a vegetable image which nonetheless disagreeably suggests sterility or the absence of male fertility.

Potentially, the important male influence is the brother, Horace. Seven years older than his sister, Oxford-educated, an attorney and the only character in the novel who possesses both judgment and integrity, he is in a good position to advise her. An ignorant woman with a son to raise, a suitor to choose and a big household to run, she badly needs his help. Traditionally, the Southern gentlewoman relies heavily on male relatives in situations of that kind, even when they are not qualified as Horace is; but Narcissa, whose name means self-love, consults only her own opinions — a shoddy amalgam of gossip and ignorant town conventionality. She pays no attention to her brother except to regard him as a more or less harmless lunatic in need of firm female protection or control, whether in managing her affairs or his own.

Either because they are empty-headed or the women surrounding them are, all of the "civilized" males, especially Horace, are weak and ineffectual — a parody of the absent "pater familias".

The other domestic parody is scarcely pictured at all in the novel, although it is referred to a great deal: the little bungalow in suburban Kinston, purchased "on the mortgage plan", where, until the opening of the novel, Horace has been living unhappily with his wife, Belle, and his teenage step-daughter, Little Belle. Narcissa's home, the old Sartoris mansion, represents the contemporary dullness, pettiness and lassitude of a household which, at some other time, may have had purpose and animation (although Faulkner carefully avoids referring anywhere in *Sanctuary* to this other time). The Kinston bungalow, without past or traditions, is petty middle-class domesticity, 1920s vintage, on a reduced and still more commonplace scale. The reader glimpses into the interior only once — towards the end of the novel, in the penultimate chapter, where it stands as epitaph for Horace and his fate. Separated from his wife and home over an indefinite period,

weeks or months, culminating in the horrors of Goodwin's murder by, and his own narrow escape from, the angry lynch mob, Benbow returns to the only "sanctuary" he has left:

He entered the house from the back and came to her door, and looked into the room. She was reading in bed, a broad magazine with a colored back. The lamp had a rose-colored shade. On the table sat an open box of chocolates.

"I came back," Horace said.

She looked at him across the magazine.

"Did you lock the back door?" she said.

As the novel opens, Horace is in flight from his home because, as he explains to Ruby, every Friday he had to meet the train to get his wife a box of fresh shrimp "until after awhile I follow myself to the station and stand aside and watch Horace Benbow take that box off the train and start home with it, changing hands every hundred steps, and I follow him thinking. Here lies Horace Benbow in a fading series of small stinking spots on a Mississippi sidewalk." The final situation is a drearier replay of the initial one.

In a more extreme way, the Kinston bungalow represents the same sort of domestic parody as Narcissa's household: a family dominated by two smug, narrow-minded women; and a cheap female culture (represented by the woman's magazine Belle reads) substituted for a genuine ideal of culture and civilization. The concluding scene — Belle eating chocolates, lying in bed, and reading a magazine while she issues orders to her husband — is also an inversion of the situation at Frenchman's Bend, where the rights were the man's and the drudgery the woman's.

Faulkner does not allow himself to express explicitly the domestic ideal which governs the two halves of his parody. He juxtaposes the two worlds, and refuses comment on the significance. His only "comment" is to present a third sanctuary, Miss Reba's brothel in Memphis, the only sanctuary in which the man's and woman's world comes together, and which combines the worst features of both — the perversion, filth, lawlessness and violence of Frenchman's Bend, combined with the hypocrisy, decorum, conventionality and false civilization of Jefferson.

A good many of the images connected with the brothel mirror in a very specific way images connected with the town. Temple's room there is heavily polite, decorous. The clock on top of the mantle is of "flowered china, supported by four china nymphs". A

slop jar in the corner is "dressed in fluted, rose-colored paper", and the light bulb is concealed by rose-colored paper. Belle's bedroom light also has a rose-colored shade. Curtains of machine-lace hang motionless from the window, and the whole room has an "air of musty stodginess, decorum; where, as in a stagnant pool, there seemed to linger spent ghosts of voluptuous gestures and dead lusts". The Jefferson courtroom, where the curtains blow overhead, has "that unmistakable odor of courtrooms: that musty odor of spent lusts and greeds and bickerings". The institutional parody and the domestic parody imagistically mingle in this passage.

There is also a horrible, or sometimes comic, mingling of the filth and violence of Frenchman's Bend with the respectability of china nymphs and rose-colored paper. The rose-colored paper hides a "slop jar"; the lace curtains stand stiff because they are heavy with soot. The reader does not forget the purpose of the room or the reason Temple is held prisoner there — in what amounts to an institutionalization of the corn-cob rape at Frenchman's Bend. Law and legalism and violations of the law and legalism jostle in bizarre coexistence. "I've had two police captains drinking beer in my dining room, and the commissioner himself upstairs with one of my girls", Miss Reba announces proudly. "They got drunk and crashed the door in on him and found him buck-nekkid, dancing the highland fling. A man fifty years old, seven foot tall, with a head like a peanut."

Faulkner's pours a cold brilliance into the brothel scenes, combined with low burlesque. The two country bumpkins, Virgil and Fonzo, wander into the place convinced first that it is a respectable boarding house; and later, when they see inexplicable quantities of women's undergarments lying about and visitors coming and going at all hours, decide that Miss Reba is a "dressmaker" with a great many marriageable daughters. These touches emphasize the domestic parody, but ring changes, virtuoso fashion, on it. The entrance to the whorehouse is hidden by a "lattice," and in the front yard are "two small, wooly white dogs, one with a pink and the other a blue ribbon". Miss Reba, who is heavily sentimental about the married state, has named one of them "Mr. Binford" after her dear departed. "We was happy as two doves", she wheezes, choking from asthma or excessive sentimentality.

The best of these brothel scenes takes place in the front parlor. After Red's funeral, Miss Reba and two of her cronies, probably

ex-whores, sip first beer and then gin from tea-cups while carrying on a "lady's" conversation which horribly mixes polite banalities about the funeral ("Didn't he look sweet", says one of them, a woman with "gold nose-glasses on a gold chain and iron gray hair" who looks like a school-teacher) with "gossip" about the sexual perversions taking place upstairs in Temple's bedroom. Meanwhile, a small boy, apparently the illegitimate son of one of the women — his name is "Uncle Bud" — wanders around listening to the conversation and draining the alcohol from the teacups, completely forgotten about until, limp-kneed, his "face fixed in an expression of glassy idiocy", he is hauled from the kitchen, where he has broken into the beer supply. What is best in the humor goes on at a level below the one at which the reader fixes his attention: a parody of Narcissa and the other Jefferson matrons as gin-sipping whores; of the silent, ten-year-old Boris as Uncle Bud; of the respectable parlor — and bedroom, kitchen, courtroom, jailroom and the other rooms where civilization is supposed to take place, as the rooms of a bawdy house.

Pairing *Sanctuary* with *Requiem for a Nun* as "crime" and "punishment", Olga Vickery has pointed out persuasively that Faulkner's theme is "justice". Lawrance Thompson, who does not pair it, has pointed out polemically that the theme is "love". The subject of *Sanctuary* is usually viewed, quite justly so, as wider than domesticity. But within the large limits of Faulkner's theme, however that theme is labelled, domesticity forms one of two essential poles. What is a man? What is a woman? Given the traditionless dimensions of modern life, what sort of relationship between man and woman is possible? These questions could not have been far from Faulkner's conscious thought when he composed *Sanctuary*. Domesticity is one extreme point of that relationship — or, rather, nightmare non-relationship; sexuality is the opposite point. The line between them forms the thematic axis on which *Sanctuary* turns.

Faulkner defines his sexual theme through the contrast between the male world of Frenchman's Bend and the feminized world of Jefferson. More pointedly, he defines it in his brothel scenes. Mainly, though, Faulkner explores and defines the maleness and femaleness of his characters by pairing and contrasting them. Femaleness is represented by Temple Drake and Ruby Lamar, both parodies of ideal femininity, especially Temple, whose name stands ironically for sanctuary — the "temple" of virginity and femininity violated from the outside but



also from within. A leggy, slim-hipped, orange-haired coed, Temple is a caricature of the 1920s flapper, with her “scant skirt,” uptilted hat and lip-sticked Cupid-bow mouth. An unstable mixture of innocent freshness and harsh sexual allure, she is a modern version of the *femme fatale*, the enticing woman who tempts men to destruction. Ruby Lamar also has something of this specifically female sexual character, although in her case not associated with danger to men, suggested by the name “Ruby Lamar” — which somehow manages to sound like the madeup name of a strip-tease artist, chorus girl or fan-dancer. A daredevil who in the pre-automobile era had climbed down the rainpipe (while her father and brother, armed with shotguns, sat in ambush) to elope with her lover in his “yellow buggy”; and later, in her heyday, a high-priced trollop who had generously given away her expensive undergarments and lingerie to her black maid, she represents female glamor in an earlier style, on a less complicated social plane. Little of it is left, however, in the figure Faulkner paints at Frenchman’s Bend. We get only an ironic reminder: “A woman’s undergarment of faded pink silk”, hanging on the line to dry along with baby clothes and men’s clothes, “the lace resembling a ragged fibre-like fraying of the cloth itself”, a calico patch “sewed neatly” into what is left of the silk. Drab and anti-glamorous in her untied brogans and patched underwear, Ruby has been transformed — by “love” as well as domestic drudgery — into something different, even opposite, from what her name and history suggest. The woman as vamp, flirt, *femme fatale*, glamor girl and sex symbol but without domestic value or responsibility; the woman as devoted mother, faithful wife, laundress, cook and domestic drudge but without female glamor — these are the alternatives Faulkner projects.

“Man?” Ruby says to Temple, her eyes blazing with cold anger, “You’ve never seen a real man. You don’t know what it is to be wanted by a real man. And thank your stars you haven’t and never will, for then you’d find out just what that little putty face is worth, and all the rest of it you think you are jealous of when you’re just scared of it. And if he is just man enough to call you whore, you’ll say Yes, Yes, and you’ll crawl naked in the dirt and mire for him to call you that.” Faulkner manages elegantly to pack a lot of meaning into Ruby’s few incoherent lines. On one level Ruby is talking about herself. Goodwin is the man who has called her whore, and she is the woman who has said Yes, Yes and crawled through the dirt and mire for him to call her that. “I have

slaved for that man. I worked night shifts as a waitress so I could see him Sundays at the prison. I lived two-years in a single room cooking over a gas-jet because I promised him. I lied to him and made money to get him out of prison and when I told him how I made it, he beat me." As she explains all of this to Temple, the temptress of the man she loves, simultaneously frying breakfast meat for a houseful of criminals and morons and changing her baby's dirty diapers, she is still crawling through the dirt and mire; she is still saying Yes, Yes.

But on quite another level Ruby is giving a prophecy, in ironic but accurate outline, of Temple's quite opposite fate and destiny as a woman. For Temple is not, as Ruby foresees, to be "wanted" by a "man" in the sense that Goodwin is a man. She is wanted by Popeye, an impotent, chinless rapist, who violates her with a corncob, locks her in a brothel, dresses her like a whore, and mates her to a hired "stud". In a sense, Temple says Yes, Yes. As Red, the man Popeye hires, comes towards her, "Temple did not move":

Her eyes began to grow darker and darker, lifting into her skull above a half moon of white, without focus, with the blank rigidity of a statue's eyes. She began to say Ah-ah-ah-ah in an expiring voice, her body arching slowly backward as though faced by an exquisite torture. When he touched her she sprang like a bow, hurling herself upon him, her mouth gaped and ugly like that of a dying fish as she writed her loins against him.

He dragged his face free by main strength. With her hips grinding against him, her mouth gaping in straining protrusion, bloodless, she began to speak. "Let's hurry. Anywhere..."

Written before the era of "Sexual Liberation", this scene describes with chilling modernity a Temple whose sexuality has been totally liberated — from habit, conscience, morality, love. Temple arranges the meeting, knowing that Red will be killed as a consequence; but she does not think of this, she wants the few minutes of "exquisite torture". When Ruby speaks of "crawling naked through the dirt and mire" the lines have, as applied to Ruby herself — her "slaving", her self-sacrifice, even what she calls her "jazzing" — a distinct Christian undertone of forbearance, suffering and self-abnegation. The "Yes, Yes" as well, applied to Ruby, fairly resonates with the nobility of deliberate choice. The same words applied to Temple turn out to have a different, a quite opposite, meaning. The distance between these



meanings pinpoints with a neat irony Faulkner's two poles of female sexuality.

*Sanctuary* opens with an energetic contrast between the main male figures, Benbow, the lawyer, and Popeye, the outlaw. In the initial paragraph and throughout the rest of the novel, Benbow wears "worn gray flannels". He carries a "tweed coat" over his arm. He smokes a pipe, and he is hatless. Popeye smokes a cigarette, and perpetually wears a hat, "all angles like a modernistic lampshade". Instead of flannels and tweeds, he wears a black suit, black trousers and a "tight high-waisted coat", a study in blacks and whites, like a figure from one of the silent films of the 'twenties. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* comes to mind. He is flat, two-dimensional. Even in the out-of-doors, his "face had a queer bloodless color as though seen by electric light", and his movements are unnatural, quick, jerky — as are those of Temple, whom in one or two other respects he also resembles. Faulkner also describes him in terms of industrial processes, machine parts. He has the "vicious depthless quality of stamped tin"; his eyes are "two knobs of soft black rubber"; his arms when touched feel light and rigid, like "aluminium tubes".

The strangeness and force of this imagery are turned, partly at least, to suggest opposite connections with Nature. As the novel opens, we see Benbow kneeling to drink from a spring. The scene is lushly, poetically "natural". There is a screen of bushes; the "spring welled up at the root of a beech tree and flowed away upon a bottom of whorled and waved sand. It was surrounded by a thick growth of cane and brier, of cypress and gum." Nearby, "a bird sang". As he drinks, Benbow hears the song. Afraid of the woods, Popeye takes the high road. He avoids the water from the spring. Later he jumps in terror from accidental contact with a bird — an owl rather than a songbird.

If Faulkner fits Popeye and Benbow oppositely to Nature, he also fits them oppositely to Civilization. Both men, as the novel opens, have something concealed in their pockets. Popeye has a gun; Benbow has a book — which turns out to be the poems of Keats. Besides suggesting the source of the songbird and spring, the Keats suggests in a precise way the cultural and civilizational ideal Benbow stands for. "From my window I could see the grape arbor, and in the winter I could see the hammock too. But in the winter it was just the hammock. That is why we know nature is a she; because of that conspiracy between female flesh and female season. So each season I would watch the reaffirmation of the old

ferment," says Benbow in his first and most characteristic speech, the language, imagery, thought and mood of which can hardly be distinguished from that of the Faulkner who wrote *Sanctuary*, and who, like Benbow, was also a lover of the poems of Keats. Although not an "ideal" as a man, Benbow comes close to being Faulkner's ideal of civilization — the country gentleman, recognizably Southern in his speech and manners but also Oxford-educated, tweedy, the English gentleman (Hemingway and Fitzgerald were also enamored of the English gentleman at this period) who combines a heritage of appreciation for the out-of-doors with cultivation, the civilized arts, and a traditional but liberal code of conduct.

If Benbow is civilization in its traditional and ideal aspects, Popeye is their opposite. Unlike the long-winded Benbow, he seldom speaks, but when he does his language has the smart, flip quality of the stereotyped 1920s gangster — that of the hired gunmen, for instance, in Hemingway's "The Killers". At a roadhouse, he demands "a couple of bars of candy". "What kind", the waitress asks. "Candy," he answers. His name, "Popeye", is drawn out of the syndicated cartoons of the time; his appearance — the jerky movements, the black-and-white absence of color — from the films; and his "story" — as rapist, killer, bootlegger, jail-bird and condemned man — from the tabloid newspapers. A synthesis of the images of popular culture, he represents modernity in its cheapest, most traditionless sense.

The sexual contrasts between Popeye and Benbow express, more or less, the cultural antithesis. We learn little about Benbow sexually — except for a single almost undecipherable scene (although an important one which has not been given the critical attention it deserves), which I will deal with later. But we see him throughout the novel in a series of non-sexual relationships with women. Unfailingly gentlemanly, he plays Sir Galahad to his sister, his wife, his daughter, and especially Ruby, whom he chivalrously refuses when she offers to "pay" him in her usual way for his help. We see Popeye mainly in relation to Temple — a relationship, if it can be called that, which is entirely sexual, and which occupies the center of the novel. Voyeuristic, impotent but at the same time violent, Popeye's rape of Temple is a parody of the chivalric ideal; a parody of love between men and women; a parody, even in its physiological details, of the sex act itself.

At about the same time that Faulkner was writing *Sanctuary*, the cartoon story of Popeye, the under-sized "sailorman" with the

over-sized chin, of Olive Oyl, his skinny girl friend, and Brutto, his enormous, rough-shaven competitor, was enjoying its first popular success. Perhaps because of the rise of the flapper and the emancipated female, the sudden appearance of the American woman in force on the job market and the polling place; and the increasing threat to male monopoly and supremacy posed by the machine — for all of these reasons, male chivalry in America, and along with this “maleness” and “femaleness”, was under stress and in process of change, a sore point, but therefore also a risible one, on the American post-war consciousness. The satire-comedy of Popeye managed cleverly, in one formulistic strip after another, to daily and weekly exploit the uneasiness and milk laughter out of the contradictions. For the cartoon Popeye is two opposite things at the same time; and so is Olive. When attacked by Brutto, who steals kisses, kidnaps her, chains her to railway ties and locks her in abandoned houses, she is the tearful, old-fashioned archetypal “maiden in distress”; and Popeye, after gobbling his can of spinach, the strong and always victorious knight who rescues her from violence, sexual abuse — whatever it is that Brutto is supposed to represent. But when seen in their domestic setting, Popeye, the potential rough-neck knight, is abject, weak-kneed — the hen-pecked husband (as is Brutto, too, in some of the episodes); while Olive Oyl, the helpless maiden, turns into a domineering shrew and termagant. Faulkner parodies minor aspects of the cartoon; his Popeye is chinless. Obviously, he also inverts and parodies major aspects. But he exploits the same contradictions, materials and subjects: a domestic, female-dominated world versus a male-dominated world of violence, rape and the out-of-doors; and, more important, an analysis of maleness divided between two opposing figures, the outlaw-rapist and the gentleman-knight.

Faulkner's minor male characters also play theme-and-variations on the chivalric parody. Gowan Stevens, the “Virginia gentleman”, who pays lip service to the twin ideals of holding one's liquor and protecting one's women-folk, passes out from too much liquor, leaving Temple at the mercy of Popeye, Van and the other lust-crazed maniacs at Frenchman's Bend. Sodden and helpless from drink and terror, he continues to drink, passing out while still protesting that he is going to “protect” Temple from the rapists. The moronic Tommy, a voyeur like Popeye, also protests that he is protecting Temple from the roughnecks. “Dern them fellers”, he whispers to himself indignantly while, “standing

guard", he applies his eye to the peep-hole. During the scene in which he is murdered, he is still "guarding" Temple, still spying on her as she is being raped.

At a deeper level, the same contradictions appear in the two major characters. Popeye locks Temple in the Memphis brothel mainly as a way of prolonging his chance to abuse her. Yet one senses several levels below the realistic surface a slow-moving, stately imitation of a medieval romance with Temple as the imprisoned maiden, the brothel as the castle, Miss Reba and the servant Minnie as fire-breathing dragons protecting the castle-gates, Red as the besieging knight, and Popeye as combined courtly lover and father-protector. Red's funeral is a brilliant imitation in its own way of a gangland-style funeral; but the murder itself in no sense represents the gangland code. It is a parody of the chivalric code. Popeye issues the order in his role of protector — as the keeper of Temple's vanished purity, mirroring in parody a series of chivalric protectors: Judge Drake, who corrupts justice to preserve his daughter's reputation; the chivalric father of Ruby who had tried to gun down Ruby's first lover; and the gentlemanly Benbow, who tries unsuccessfully, without benefit of a gun, to protect Little Belle from promiscuous encounters with strange boys on trains and in other public places.

Brittle and not very real insofar as it is merely a parody, *Sanctuary* takes on disturbing depth in the single scene in which we are allowed to see briefly into Benbow's sexual thoughts and feelings. After visiting the ravaged Temple in the Memphis brothel, he returns to Jefferson where in his room there is a photo of Little Belle on the dresser. As he looks at it, he is suddenly sick to his stomach, and, while he vomits, strange images of rape and sexual abuse leap into his mind.

Benbow's illness has its start on the train, immediately after he has heard, and been sickened by, the horrific images that pour from Temple's lips. In part, his reaction is that of a Southern gentleman. Yet what he feels is not that kind of moral indignation. It is rather disgust, tinged by a kind of generalized philosophical pessimism, and expressed, incoherently for the most part, in apocalyptic images of evil, loss-of-innocence and despair. The disgust mixed with pity is directed partly towards Temple herself. "Better for her if she were dead tonight", Horace thinks. It is directed at everyone else, too — Popeye, Goodwin, Ruby, the baby, "all put into a single chamber, bare, lethal, immediate, profound: a single blotting instant between the indignation and



the surprise.” Mainly it is self-directed. And I too would be better off dead, Horace thinks, “removed, cauterized out of the old, tragic flank of the world. And I too, now that we’re all isolated.” When he switches on the light in his room, these generalized feelings leap into sharper focus. For he sees on the photograph of Little Belle the same expression he had seen on the face of Temple, the “small face” which seems to him to “swoon in a voluptuous langor, blurring, leaving upon his eyes a soft and fading aftermath of invitation and voluptuous promise.” Violently ill, he retches; and as he does so, a pornographic fantasy, “a girl bound naked on her back on a flat car moving at speed through a black tunnel”, flashes into his mind, the linked image of Little Belle and Temple, and also the link between his own sexual nature and that of Popeye. Half rapist and half knight, Popeye and Benbow are the violently divided halves of a single figure. Benbow’s realization of that explains the violence of his reaction; it also explains a good deal of what is most humane and serious in Faulkner’s conception of the novel.

Taken as a whole, *Sanctuary* is a powerful book but one marred by serious faults, disagreeable excesses. On the one hand, it is an ugly book — or, if not that, one with ugly characters and events. The tone is aggrieved and embittered, and the bitterness is not resolved. If the reader is looking for balance, what is he to think of a book in which the brothel is a symbol of the modern world and a psychopathic rapist the symbol of modern man? On the other hand, if the ugliness and bitterness are defects of an unchecked impulse towards unvarnished truth-telling, they are accompanied by an opposite defect, an unevenness or thinness in the realism, a lack of plausible psychology, the substitution of the schematic or evasive for the circumstantial. Judged by the standards of a realistic novel, some of the duller characters, Narcissa and Benbow, can pass muster barely; but the stars of the piece, Popeye and Temple, are cut-outs, the brilliant fantasies of a small-town Southerner without much opportunity, apparently, for first-hand observation. In addition, there is another fault — or, if not a fault, a peculiar quality to the book as a whole, responsible, I believe, for that tongue-tied silence or uneasiness most critics have displayed when obliged to comment on it. About impotence, the book itself seems impotent. The reader feels a fierce energy, a violent compression, like the tension of a spring coiled tightly at the heart of the book, but it goes off without resonance, the whole

of the book "bare, lethal, immediate, profound: a single blotting instant between the indignation and the surprise".

To some extent the lack of realism can be explained by Faulkner's method. Although he draws more heavily than usual in *Sanctuary* on his personal experiences and direct observations, the outlines of his story are not realistically derived. Generally, whatever his materials and however close to or remote from first-hand experience, he joins them at great pressure into the ancient traditional forms — tragedy, comedy, romance, horror. *Sanctuary* drives in the direction of horror — in recoil, so to speak, from romance; and it is the requirements of the horror rather than of realism that suggest the characters of Popeye and Temple, the details of the rape and murders, and the outline of the book. Nearly all of Faulkner's novels are written in this way, but *Sanctuary* differs in one important respect from the others — the ones the critics usually consider the "major" novels, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*. Faulkner generates a tension in these last books by a clash between the truth-telling and the romance. There is a sharply observed, comically-painful or bitterly-ignoble real world; and there is a lost world, the heroic past, the mythic and legendary South. The two meet and interfuse, the one defined against the other in a way that gives complexity and depth to both. Each moment of "time-present" in *The Sound and the Fury*, the whole of the three ignoble days of 1928, including even the loss of Luster's golf ball, takes on meaning and tragic resonance in its intricate counterplay with the drama of memory and loss. Alone among Faulkner's major novels, *Sanctuary* foregoes that characteristic Faulknerian tension. As though deliberately, Faulkner avoids all reference to the past. The reader could never know anything from reading *Sanctuary* of the rich history of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, not even the origins of the places and people who figure most prominently in the story — Frenchman's Bend, the Sartoris mansion, Jefferson, the Snopes family, the Benbows. The whole of *Sanctuary* is the ignoble present. Deprived of both supports, on the one hand the full-bodied realism based on personal experience to be found in Hemingway or Fitzgerald and which gives circumstantiality to their novels of modern life — *The Great Gatsby* or *The Sun Also Rises*; deprived, on the other hand, of the support of Southern myth, romance or history which gives complexity and resonance to *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner is left in *Sanctuary* with a real-



unreal fable of modern life, thin on the one hand, ugly and embittered on the other.

Yet as a book with the right to set its own critical standard, *Sanctuary* earns by its limitations as well as by its liberties a special poetic intensity, power and vision. Without support of Southern history or myth, Faulkner drives his story, in recognizable stages, violently inward. At the most external level, Faulkner draws his story and scenes out of the objective world he observed around him — the Southern types, the conversations heard aboard trains, the writings on the walls of lavatories. At a more internal level, Faulkner reaches towards a psychological realism. The strained relations between Benbow and his sister; his frustrations as a well-intentioned but ineffectual husband and father; his humiliating defeats as an unappreciated lawyer and justice-maker — the whole of this level of the novel, although transformed by the imaginative process, is recognizably based on Faulkner's own strained relation with his female relatives, the problems of his marriage to a divorced woman (Belle is also a divorced woman), his feelings of frustration as an unappreciated novelist who could not get his books published. *Sanctuary* is the only major novel of Faulkner based at all in a recognizable way on the psychological facts of his life at the time he wrote it; and, along with *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel that provides sharp insights into Faulkner the man. At a still more internal level, Faulkner draws on the movies, newsreels, cartoons, jokes, detective stories, books and journalism of the time. The name "Popeye" points ironically to one of the sources, but the sources are not identifiable for the most part. Virgil and Fonzo could be modeled after the pimply bumpkin Amedée Fleurissoire who innocently takes a room in a Roman brothel (in Gide's *Les caves du Vatican*), but the source is more probably the bumpkin-in-the-brothel salesman joke of the 1920s, dozens of varieties of which were current when Faulkner wrote *Sanctuary*, and which he seems to have combined. Temple as coed and vamp, Benbow as amateur sleuth and trial lawyer, Popeye — with his perpetual hat, "slanted cigarette", and automatic — as gangster and trigger-man — these images, composed of a *melange* of realistic detail and popular stereotype, are heightened by Faulkner, as is in general all of his material drawn from popular culture, into something half in between dream and reality, in which the two seem to merge. At a still deeper level, Faulkner touches on a remote romance, a fairy-tale archetype in much the sense that Northrop Frye made much of

archetype in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, with Temple as imprisoned fairy princess and the brothel as castle. There are a few images in *Sanctuary*, one in which Temple imagines herself as she is raped wearing a medieval chastity belt ("a kind of iron belt in a museum a king or something used to lock up the queen when he had to go away"), and one or two other images, ironic in intention, which link Temple to a medieval or Christian past; but this romantic level is never articulated in *Sanctuary*. Deeply buried, it governs, reverse-fashion, the parody-romance between Popeye and Temple at a level more or less inaccessible to the reader, and certainly to the characters. At the deepest level, one which one can talk about only at the risk of absurdity, Faulkner touches on a totally unpictured ideality which the reader of *Sanctuary* can know only by its absence — the "pater familias" who never appears; the ideal man, woman and child who appear only in parts and never come together as a family; the act of genuine love which is never performed; the joined world of man and woman, Nature and Civilization, which we see only in parodic image or in two disjointed halves; the missing "sanctuary" which is nowhere to be found. Although it cannot be explained or represented, it is the hidden source of Faulkner's coiled tension; the buried spring-point of the savage humor and cold anger which shapes the paragraphs and sentences; the reason for that disturbing emptiness, "bare, lethal, immediate, profound", in which Faulkner mirrors with genius his vision of modern life.

James SCHROETER.

