

Olivia Krom

When Ignorance Begins to Fade: An Analysis of *The Unvanquished* and *Digital Yoknapatawpha*

Poems, Plays, and Prose

Dr. Joiner

“What counted was, what one of us had done or seen that the other had not, and ever since Christmas I had been ahead of Ringo because I had seen a railroad, a locomotive. Only I know now it was more than that with Ringo, though neither one of us was to see the proof of my belief for some time yet and we were not to recognize it as such even then. It was as if Ringo felt it to and that the railroad, the rushing locomotive he hoped to see symbolized it- the motion, the impulse to move which had already seethed to a head among his people, darker than themselves, reasonless, following and seeking a delusion, a dream, a bright shape which they could not know since there was nothing in their heritage, nothing in the memory even of the old men to tell the others” (Faulkner 81).

William Faulkner was a southern author who took great pride in his heritage. Faulkner's work shared a common theme: The Antebellum South. He wrote in a romantic fashion about the history, the victories, and the hardships of the southern community. His novel, *The Unvanquished*, tells the story of a prominent southern family facing the repercussions of the Civil War. The specific passage analyzed in this paper, depicts important issues revolving around the concepts of equality and motion symbolized by a rushing locomotive. This passage, supported by a graphic taken from *Digital Yoknapatawpha*, is critical to the development of the novel because it depicts the importance placed on equality, race, and change symbolized by motion.

The passage is a crucial part of the novel. This passage starts with a very important line: "What counted was, what one of us had done or seen that the other had not" (Faulkner 81). By saying this, Bayard is making the claim that he views Ringo as an equal. I believe this is Bayard's view because he says the only thing that differentiates between the two is action. Bayard uses the words "see" and "done" to show this. Therefore, Bayard views himself as superior to Ringo because he has physically seen a locomotive pass through on the railroad tracks. Bayard emphasizes the difference between "railroad" and "locomotive" in this passage. He is doing so to further demonstrate the differences created through action. If an individual were to only see a railroad, he would simply see stagnant tracks. However, if this individual were to see a locomotive on the tracks, he would be able to physically see the motion that is represented by the tracks. The separation between Bayard and Ringo is alluded to once more in the passage when Ringo is described as "feeling" the difference. While feeling is also a physical action, it is much different than seeing. I believe what Bayard is feeling is the beginning of the racial divide between the two boys. Because Bayard has been able to experience the movement

of the train firsthand, he views himself as superior to Ringo. However, Ringo, having never physically seen a locomotive, is left with a feeling of inferiority which is symbolic of the racial divide we see come to fruition later in the text when Ringo is referred to as “Bayard’s boy.” The questions this passage raises about equality are important in terms of foreshadowing for the rest of the novel, but it is especially important to Bayard. This is true because Bayard and Ringo have been living in a state of ignorance without a realistic understanding of slavery. Now, for the first time, Bayard is using action to symbolize the underlying cause of the differences between the two boys: Race. The action shown in this passage can be taken a step further. Bayard will always be superior to Ringo because he will have the opportunity to take action in ways Ringo will never due to his skin color. Bayard’s acknowledgment of this separation also bars the question: Can Bayard trust what he sees? According to the passage, what Bayard sees is what makes him superior. However, Bayard grew up in a very isolated area where he witnessed a very different version of the South. He saw his Father treat the slaves on his plantation with a level of respect that is not seen in most of the southern community. Therefore, what Bayard is now seeing in different parts of the community is not aligning with what he has seen previously on his plantation. This passage brings to light the view Bayard holds of what equality means to him based on the action taken by different characters.

Another important part of this passage is the concept of motion. Motion, as seen in the passage, is symbolized by the locomotive: “the rushing locomotive he hoped to see symbolized it- the motion, the impulse to move” (Faulkner 81). In this passage, movement is depicted in a negative light because the words used to describe motion have a negative connotation. For example, Bayard uses dark, reasonless, and delusion to describe the movement in terms of abolition. The negative connotation used in this passage is symbolic of the negative cultural view

of the abolition movement in the South. When talking about the slaves, Bayard is describing them as impulsively seeking a delusion. This description is important because we learn how Bayard views the abolition movement. For the first time, we see Bayard adapting the radical views of the southern community. Bayard's use of the words seeking, and delusion are particularly important. A delusion, or a dream, is not physical like the locomotive Bayard has seen. Therefore, the slaves are actively looking for something that will never be tangible. Unlike Bayard, the slaves have never experienced freedom, making them inferior to the white race. The slaves are looking for "light" in a movement that has been described as "darker than themselves." The light in this passage refers to the headlight on the front of the train. The slaves are, according to Bayard, hopelessly searching for something that is not in the memory of this race. In order to form a memory, an individual must first be involved in the action of witnessing an event. However, the railroad has been destroyed which means the slaves will never have an opportunity to find what they have been frantically searching for, making them internally inferior. The light shape in the distance could also be symbolic of abolition. Light is traditionally symbolic of hope and purity, so to the slave's abolition is a symbol of hope for an end to the inhumane lifestyle the slaves have been subjected to. Nonetheless, the source of light will forever remain stagnant. The railroad track which enabled the locomotive to move has been destroyed subsequently halting the movement of the train. This means that the slaves will never have an opportunity to view the locomotive in action which would level the playing field amongst the different races. All in all, the movement symbolized in this passage is representative of the underlying racial views of the abolition movement which has begun to seep into the young mind of Bayard Sartoris.

The graphic attached, taken from *Digital Yoknapatawpha*, is a graph of characters categorized by the location in which events in the novel take place. This graph shows that the majority of the events that Bayard and Ringo have been involved in have taken place on the Sartoris Plantation. This plantation is rather isolated from the rest of the community, meaning the boys have grown up in a secluded environment. Because of this, the boys have a very sheltered world view. Their opinions and understanding of the South and the current Civil War have been shaped only by the slaves and family members living on the Plantation. Because of the isolated location of the plantation, the boys have not been exposed to the traditional racist beliefs and treatment of slaves in the South. The graphic goes on to show the locations of other events in the novel; however, it is glaringly obvious that the majority of the events seen in the book take place at the Sartoris Plantation. This further emphasizes the claim that Bayard and Ringo are very sheltered from the reality of the South. The image attached supports the claim made previously that the boys are living in a state of ignorance; however, for the first time in this chapter Bayard is alluding to the deeply rooted racial separation that not only creates the divide between he and Ringo, but also causes the divide in the south and the overall divide between the Union and the Confederacy.

Overall, this passage is important to the latter parts of the novel. The passage depicts Bayard's view of equality. He originally viewed Ringo as an equal despite his skin color. Bayard claimed that the only thing that separates the two were the different actions they had experienced symbolized by the words "see" and "done." However, as the passage progresses, we learn that Bayard's views are beginning to change. The shift in belief is symbolized by the negative connotation associated with movement. The negative words used to describe the abolition movement show that Bayard has begun to adapt the radical racist views of the Confederate South

that he was once ignorant to. All in all, this passage is crucial to the development of the novel because the foreshadowing present in this passage is used to set the stage for the thematic issues about equality, change in view symbolized through motion, and race.

## Works Cited

Faulkner, William. *The Unvanquished*. Random House, 1938.

Joiner, Jennie J., John Padgett, and Dorette Sobolewski. "Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*." Added to the project: 2016. Additional editing 2019: Theresa M. Towner. *Digital Yoknapatawpha*, University of Virginia, <http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu>