

Faulkner and World War II:  
Great Homage to the South in “Two Soldiers” and “Shall Not Perish”

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**Introduction**

December 7<sup>th</sup> (Japanese time – December 8<sup>th</sup>), 1941: the Japanese air force attacked the central valley in Oahu, Hawaii, which cost the lives of a lot of citizens as well as soldiers. The incident, known as the attack on Pearl Harbor, caused the United States, standing neutral at the beginning of World War II, to participate in the global warfare at last (Tindall and Shi 1151).

The United States rushed into war with the slogan – “Remember Pearl Harbor” – and soon after William Faulkner put out a short story, “Two Soldiers,” about two brothers who decide to join the army as soon as they hear of the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was accepted by *The Saturday Evening Post* immediately and published on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1942. In addition, it was included in a high-school textbook and planned to be broadcast on TV later on. From these facts, we can surmise that the short story caught the mood of American society in the 1940’s (Jones 64-65).

We cannot say, however, “Two Soldiers” has been sufficiently explicated among the critics in spite of its popularity at the time it was published. It is true, as James B. Carothers noted, that the Faulknerian critics generally have been more interested in either the Civil War or World War I instead of World War II (73). Moreover, for the most part, critics have regarded “Two Soldiers” and its sequel, “Shall Not Perish,” as too patriotic and sentimental. For example, Frederick R. Karl asserts that “‘Two Soldiers’ ... was a piece of patriotic fluff,” (61) and Hans H. Skei that it was “written to make money and to meet the wishes of the average *Post* reader” (269).<sup>1</sup>

There is some possibility, on the other hand, for new explications of the propaganda tales, as Diane B. Jones suggests “we ought to return to ‘Two Soldiers,’ interpretive tools in hand, to see if more thorough scrutiny reveals something as yet seen only by its creator” (70-71), apart from the previous interpretations that they are “too patriotic and sentimental.” It is an affection for the South as well as patriotic zeal that Faulkner represents in the World War II tales – that’s what I try to reveal in this paper.

## **1. Friction between the South and the United States: “Two Soldiers” and “Shall Not Perish”**

When the Pacific War broke out at the beginning of the 1940’s, the United States considered that Thailand or Philippines would be the next target the Japanese army would attack, so it paid less attention to Pearl Harbor. People in the United States, therefore, were greatly shocked at the news on December 7<sup>th</sup> and complained the Japanese army’s bombing was a sneaky attack (Saito 198-200).

Shock waves pass through Pete Grier, too, as he hears the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor in “Two Soldiers.” The Griers are four – a father, a mother, Pete (just turned twenty) and his younger brother (the narrator of both tales) – and they are a poor rural family planting the vetch. Pete and the narrator help their father in his farming. After helping him, they stand by the wall of Old Man Killegrew’s house and listen to the radio. One day the siblings are standing on the outside of the house as usual and come to hear the news of Pearl Harbor.

Once Pete learns about Pearl Harbor, he suffers the dilemma: on one hand, he feels he has a duty to serve and protect his country, but, on the other hand, he has affection for his family and does not want to leave them, particularly, when they need his help on the farm. Pete is a responsible boy. He is loyal to both his nation and his family as Edmond

L. Volpe points out (260). Pete and the narrator go to the Old Man's Killegrew's house to listen to the radio after the attack on Pearl Harbor as well. The narrator is a young boy who has just begun to go to school, so he cannot understand the news by himself. Therefore, Pete explains the details of the news to the narrator for a while, but quits some days later. Pete lies on the bed silently "as a ambush" and "still as iron" (CS 83). Considering that the narrator describes Pete as having an attitude to assail enemies, the boy might have a slight anticipation that his older brother will go to the war. Even after Pete declares before his family that he is joining the army, he lays himself as "hard as iron" (86). The conflict Pete feels between wanting to serve both his country and family freezes him.

Unlike Pete, his mother and father, for different reasons, are against his decision to go into army. His mother is reluctant to agree with Pete's decision, saying, "No ... I don't want [Pete] to go ... I don't want to save the country. Them Japanese could take it and keep it, so long as they left me and my family and my children alone" (84). As a mother, she cherishes her family primarily and tries to persuade her son to save his life. Nonetheless, she reluctantly accepts her son's volition: "... if Pete's got to go to this one, he's got to go to it. Jest don't ask me to understand why" (84-85). From this statement of the mother, Shawn E. Miller notes that "Faulkner also cast [the mother] as the least patriotic" (42). A mother's affection to her son, despite encouraging him to engage in the war, is a counterpart of the patriotism to save the nation.

Pete's father is also against Pete's decision, but his reason to disagree with his son is different from the mother's feeling. The fact that he joined the army in World War I satisfies his responsibility to the nation. Besides, he says to Pete, "... what'll I do for help on the farm with you gone? It seems to me I'll get mighty far behind" (CS 85). The father, a poor farmer, is still sowing the vetch in December, which should have been

finished on November 15<sup>th</sup>. As the narrator mentions, “pap [is] still behind, just like he [has] been ever since me and Pete [have] knowed him” (82). It is obvious that the father is poor at farming. Accordingly, he is worried to lose his good assistant for his work, which clarifies that the father puts a weigh on his own field, property and daily life rather than the security of the nation.

As I have observed in the previous paragraphs, the Griers break into two kinds of personalities: Pete, knowing the crisis of the nation and participating in the war, and the mother and father, holding onto their family and life at Frenchman’s Bend. The narrator, although he follows to Pete in order to join the army after Pete’s departure, cannot be inspired by the same kind of patriotic emotions as Pete is because he is only nine years old at that time. In addition, the narrator returns to home after Pete leaves Memphis for Pearl Harbor. Therefore, the narrator, rather, is said to persist in his loyalty to his family and its life as much as his mother or his father does.

In view of the divided Griers, I shall consider the radio at the Old Man Killebrew’s house. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Pete learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor by the radio. The two brothers go to the Old Man Killebrew’s house every evening and listen to the radio by the outside wall. Volpe mentions that the Grier family is too poor to possess the radio, hence their routine to stand by the wall for the radio news (260).

We must draw more attention to the radio in addition to the indication of poverty. In fact, the radio in the 1940’s has a particular role in the American society. From the rise of its popularity in the 1920’s up until the invention of television in the 1950’s, the radio was the most important media for American people. They enjoyed music or comedy through the radio in spite of the Great Depression in the 1930’s and World War II. In all, the radio effectively encouraged the Americans at that time.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Franklin D.

Roosevelt, inaugurated as a president when World War II broke out, utilized the radio efficiently for his governing. As soon as Pearl Harbor was attacked, Roosevelt delivered a speech through the radio, declaring the day of the attack as a “Day of Infamy,” which accelerated Americans to devote themselves to the nation, in other words, the war. I would like to emphasize how the radio helped Roosevelt to persuade American citizens to keep their mind on the nation. To put it another way, the radio should be a symbol to unite the people in the United States against Japan (Yu 89).

The radio, different from magazines or newspapers, is a media which can make information known widely and immediately, so it stands to reason that Pete in “Two Soldiers” would learn of the attack on Pearl Harbor from the radio. Theresa Towner suggests that “Pete sees the U.S. as a symbol of home and the very real threat posed to it by the Japanese as a threat to home and so to himself” (98). It is possible that Pete has been afraid of his family which might be in danger as well as the United States after the attack on Pearl Harbor because, as I pointed out above, he is responsible for both his family and the United States. In this way, Pete leaves home for the Pacific Ocean to protect not only the nation, but his family.

Whereas Pete devotes himself to the nation, his mother and father cling to their own life. Furthermore, the Griers don’t own a radio, which played a role to unite the nation in the 1940’s. Eventually, the radio doesn’t work as the national symbol for Pete’s mother and father because in their personal life they are not effected directly by one of the most important innovations in the twentieth century.

The mother and father read a newspaper to get information instead of possessing a radio. After receiving the news of Pete’s death in “Shall Not Perish,” the Griers rely on the paper to obtain the news. “The Memphis paper” (CS 102), which the father brings back with him from the town, lists the names of the dead soldiers in the war, who are from

Mississippi or Arkansas, which proves that the paper is a local one in the South. Compared to the radio which played a role to unite the nation throughout World War II, the local paper emphasizes a concept of the South intensely.

It is important to remind us of the special concept, the South, which people have kept in their mind for more than one hundred years since the end of the Civil War. Wilbur J. Cash, the author of *The Mind of the South* in 1941, which is just the year of the attack on Pearl Harbor, tells the uniqueness of the South at the beginning of “Preview to Understanding”: “There exists among us by ordinary – both North and South – a profound conviction that the South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation ...” (Cash xlvi). Also, Masato Watanabe in the third chapter, titled “the South: an Indignant Autonomy,” of his book discusses the severe tension persisting even today between the South and the government of the United States (91). It reveals that there is a strong belief among the Southern people today that the South is a self-reliant country, isolated from the North. We can see such a person in “Shall Not Perish” as well. Major de Spain, who lost his son in the Pacific Ocean during World War II, murmurs, “His country and mine was ravaged and polluted and destroyed eighty years ago, before I was born” (CS 108). In addition, the narrator reminisces about the days when the Griers begin to bring a paper from town; “... Pete still *is* everywhere about the earth .... So Mother and Father and I don’t need a little wooden box to catch the voices of them that saw the courage and the sacrifice” (104). “The little wooden box” is the radio, which causes the narrator to hate the media for uniting the country as a nation beyond the concept of the South.

The friction between the South and the United States is reflected in the media through which the Griers get their information in “Two Soldiers” and “Shall Not Perish.” In the next section, I would like to focus on Faulkner in the 1940’s and expose a dilemma

he suffered then, which is expressed in these two stories.

## **2. Friction between Faulkner and the Nation: His Double Face as a Southern Author – Public and Private**

During World War II, Faulkner was positively involved in the warfare activity of the military force. He gave lectures at a CAA primary flying school and tried to get a National Guard commission (Blotner 423). After the attack on Pearl Harbor, he did his Civil Defense work (Blotner 434).

On the other hand, Faulkner was devastated financially in the 1940's. He sent a telegram to his editor, Harold Ober, for money (Blotner 425). He definitely had to earn money immediately. Then the poor author, affected by the tragedy in Hawaii in 1941, depicted two boys joining the military for the Great War in his work, "Two Soldiers." The story was so topical at the beginning in the 1940's and published soon without any rejection, which provided Faulkner with financial support. His success, however, threatened his literary reputation. In spite of Faulkner's craftsmanship, critics pointed out its sentimentality. Frederick Karl, for instance, calls it "a piece of patriotic fluff."

From 1940 to 1950, the year William Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize, his fame were gradually pervading society thanks to his career in Hollywood as a script writer. Richard Gray portrays the author's state of mind in those days:

One of the problems of his later life and writing, in fact, was that, while he [Faulkner] felt compelled sometimes to cut a public figure – to the extent, that is, of making public declarations of principle, even in his fiction – there was a strong undertow of feeling within him that tended to associate the public with the factitious. (304)

"Two Soldiers," which Faulkner positively shows a great affection for, honestly describes

the author's attitude portrayed by Gray.<sup>3</sup> Skei notes that the narrator, whose point of view should be restricted to the child's knowledge becomes, in effect, the "author's mouthpiece" (269). His point is that Faulkner expresses what he thinks through the child character that he creates, a strategy that may seem unrealistic or artificial.

Furthermore, Gray states:

A deeply private man [Faulkner] by instinct and training, his best work had entered the public arena by way of the recognition that public and private are two sides of the same coin, joined together through the currency of language. But as he was nudged, with some reluctance, into a public role – the successful man of letters speaking from the South – that recognition began to falter; and Faulkner oscillated with ever more violence between a public face and private space that seemed to be definitely separate, mutually exclusive. (304-05)

Faulkner successfully interwove private and public use of language in his early work which was evaluated as masterpieces. The two aspects of his mind, nevertheless, deviate one from another later on, so that he expresses the public declaration, separated from his mind, directly.

Now recall "Two Soldiers" and "Shall Not Perish" by Faulkner in the 1940's. Pete represents the ideal American patriot. He stands up with courage to defend the nation during wartime. These feelings expressed in the short stories are appropriate for the statements of an author who represents the United States. That is to say, the patriotic aspect is a public face of Faulkner.

On the other hand, his private space behind the public face appears in the



characters who express a strong Southern identity. Faulkner had persisted in depicting the South with great affection, but when he portrayed boys devoting themselves to the nation for the war in a sentimental way, he also describes those who cannot leave the South. They are the mother and father, who cherish their own family and life, outlasting the war in a corner of the South with grief after Pete's death.

The narrator is worth a mention in passing, who goes to Memphis and is persuaded by Pete to return to Frenchman's Bend. Faulkner seems to project his private space on him as well as the other Griers. I noted a little earlier the artificial character for the author. Moreover, his narration provides a humorous atmosphere which is not appropriate for the serious situation in the United States facing the threat of the war. I propose that Faulkner set an innocent boy under ten as a narrator because his humorous tone would prevent Faulkner himself from being involved in the patriotic fervor of the American society. At the same time, it is ironic that the humorous narration by the innocent boy in the warfare time seems to make fun of the patriotic inclination arising in the nation. Additionally, the narrator's reminiscence which I have mentioned in the previous section, "... Pete still *is* everywhere about the earth .... So Mother and Father and I don't need a little wooden box to catch the voices of them that saw the courage and the sacrifice," indicates a friction between Faulkner and the nation, which is, the United States. That is to say, Faulkner holds the patriotism represented by the radio in hatred, as the narrator hates "the little wooden box" in "Shall Not Perish."

## **Conclusion**

William Faulkner shows his patriotic attitude for the United States in "Two Soldiers" and "Shall Not Perish." At the same time, he writes an homage to the Southern people who have outlasted the global crisis in the 1940's, situating them in a small village

named Frenchman's Bend, in the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha. Pete, who is heading toward his doom at the center of the Pacific Ocean, says to his younger brother gently, "You must go home. You must look after maw, and I am depending on you to look after my ten acres. I want you to go back home" (CS 96). This may be what Faulkner wished to declare honestly, who was on his way to become a representative of the United States – "I want to go back home, the South."

\*This is an expanded and revised version of the paper read at the 53th general meeting of The American Literary Society of Japan held at Hokkai-Gakuen University on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014. I gratefully acknowledge helpful discussions with the audience on several points in the paper.

## Notes

1. Leslie Fiedler says, "In a writer whose very method is self-indulgence, that sentimentality becomes sometimes downright embarrassing, as in the stories of World War II in the present collection, "Tall Man," "Two Soldiers," etc., in which the soupiest cliché of self-sacrifice and endurance are shamelessly worked ..." (385). In addition, Volpe writes, "Inspired by World War II and written for the readers of a popular magazine, the story is an expression of fervent patriotism. ... the tales is a slick magazine story that offends with its gushing sentimentality and its cuteness" (259).
2. For further details of the history of the radio in the American society, see Finkelstein.
3. In May 26<sup>th</sup>, Ober wrote to Faulkner to ask him to give some reasons he liked "Two Soldiers," quoting a letter from Whit Burnett, who wanted to recommend the story for a radio series. In the reply, Faulkner wrote, "I like it ['Two Soldiers'] ." (SL 184)

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