

## Whiskey Culture in Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust*

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Hidden beneath the intricate prose of Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust* is the issue of alcohol and its consumption. To the novice reader, Faulkner's detailed descriptions of old Bayard's toddy ingredients, the men sharing a drink from an earthen jug, and young Bayard's begging for the keys to the liquor cabinet are essentially superfluous plot devices meant to establish the atmosphere in the scene. Upon closer analysis, however, each instance of alcohol consumption becomes representative of the characters' personalities and hidden desires, thereby strengthening the novel's themes through character development. Interestingly, every scene involving alcohol uses whiskey as the beverage of choice. The uniformity of the type of alcohol supplements the significance of the varying approaches each character uses for preparing and drinking the whiskey. Entailed within these differentiated approaches are the subtle motivations of communal bonding and isolationism, revealing the internal motivations that drive each of the characters and, when considered in respect to young Bayard, supporting the novel's major theme of simultaneous immersion in and alienation from one's culture.

### Whiskey as Community

The two symbolic representations of communal bonding within one's culture are the toddy and the moonshine jug. The toddy, which is a combination of whiskey, water (usually hot), lemons, and sugar, signifies the domestic union and recalls the sophistication of the "Old South" through the ceremonial preparation the characters undertake to make it. The jug, which contains

homemade (sometimes moonshine) whiskey, typifies male bonding in an informal, often rugged, environment.

The following scene from *Flags in the Dust* reveals the toddy's symbolic capacity in furthering the novel's themes through character development:

At last old Bayard would throw his cigar into the fire and drop his feet to the floor, and the dog would raise its head and blink and yawn with such gaping deliberation that Narcissa, watching him, invariably yawned also. "Well, Jenny?" ... presently she would return with a tray and three glasses, and old Bayard would unlock his desk and fetch the silver-stoppered decanter and compound three toddies with ritualistic care. (317)

The image depicted in this scene is one of ritual, comfort, and family. Here, the Sartoris family reclines together before the fire, enjoying the evening in each other's presence. The fire conveys the sensation of warmth to the reader, and the blinking and yawning express the sleepy, comfortable atmosphere of the room. The entire tone of this passage bears a slow, lazy pace, and the minimal dialogue between the characters attests to the ease of their relationships. In this scene, the toddy intensifies the clearly domestic ambiance by serving as the communal bonding point among the Sartorises.

On another level, the toddy carries a distinct elegance that heightens it to the level of a sacrament. The Sartorises keep their whiskey in a "silver-stoppered decanter," and prepare the toddy with "ritualistic care." The silver stopper demonstrates old Bayard's respect for this alcohol, and his actions are depicted as almost reverential. This calls to mind the image of a Catholic priest during mass who prepares the Eucharist in a similarly "ritualistic" fashion. The toddy to old Bayard is like the recreated Body and Blood of Christ for Catholics. Thus, the toddy

is a “Holy Communion” for the Sartorises, a sacred ritual that they observe daily. Faulkner does not specify the reasoning for the Sartorises’ appreciation of this drink; I submit that the sanctity of the toddy lies in its “refinement.” In the culture of alcohol, the more complicated the drink is to make, the more refined the drinker. For Bayard, the mixing of a toddy is a ceremony to be undertaken with measured care, thus refining his actions in the manner of Old South gentility. Therefore, not only does the toddy bring the Sartoris family together, it signifies the Old South to which old Bayard clings so desperately.

The one problematic aspect of this scene regards the number of people partaking in this family custom. At this point, there are four members of the Sartoris family: old Bayard, Aunt Jenny, young Bayard, and his wife Narcissa. Why, then, are there only three toddies? Faulkner is not clear regarding which of the four drinks the toddy, or if young Bayard is present in the scene. What one can deduce, however, is a fundamental chink in their domestic situation. Young Bayard is (most likely) among the family as they enact this ritual; however, he appears as more of a spectator on the fringe of their community or as a very passive contributor to their ceremony. The Sartoris domestic community is not a complete union; even this minor gap demonstrates the theme of simultaneously being within and without one’s personal culture, as well as the theme of the (dys)functionality of the family which leads to young Bayard’s deeply-rooted sense of isolation.

While the toddy represents a “cultured” form of unification among a family and harkens to the elegance of the Old South, the moonshine whiskey jug portrays the traditional brotherly community among Southern men. This is most evident in the following instance from the novel: “In the meantime they had lost the breather cap, and as they moved from house to house all six of them drank fraternally from the jug, turn and turn about” (165). In this scene, young Bayard

and several working class young men are drunkenly serenading the women all over Jefferson. At first, only the white men drink directly out of the jug, allowing the black men to share the whiskey by drinking from the car's oily breather cap as if it were a cup. Considering that the setting is early twentieth-century Mississippi, the simple act of sharing the whiskey with black men signifies a veritable brotherhood among the men. However, once the alcohol has erased their sense of racial dissimilarity, the breather cap becomes negligible, and they drink together "fraternally."

This passage is significant in that it demonstrates the unifying power of alcohol and young Bayard's willingness to participate in this communal experience. Unlike the sophisticated toddy, which has familial ties and possibly reminds him of his lost brother, the moonshine releases Bayard from the gentility of his upper class family name and supplies him with "substitute" brothers to replace Johnny. Thus, since the whiskey jug presents young Bayard with a fraternal kinship that allows him to escape his familial identity, he is at once immersed in a communal culture while remaining alienated from it.

#### Whiskey as Isolation

Although some of his encounters with whiskey encourage young Bayard to interact within communal bonds, other aspects of his alcohol consumption represent his internal isolation from the social world. The first indication of his alienation occurs during his discussion with Rafe MacCallum in the back of Deacon's store:

He raised his glass, but instead of drinking he held [the toddy] for a moment to his nose, and the small muscles at the base of his nostrils tautened whitely, then he swung the glass from him and with a steady hand he emptied it onto the floor.

... [H]e picked up the bottle again and poured the glass half full of raw liquor and sloshed a little water into it and tilted it down his throat. (133)

Because the toddy is symbolic of the family, young Bayard's repulsion and his purposeful casting aside of its contents represents his rejection of his familial role as a result of his feeling of estrangement from the family. Whenever young Bayard is haunted by the memory of his brother and experiences his isolating despair, he consumes whiskey in an unswervingly antisocial manner, which allows him to feel unaffiliated with his family.

By the end of the novel, young Bayard completely isolates himself from emotional contact. In Chicago, "[h]e was drinking whisky and soda steadily, with the bottle beside him. His hand was steady enough, but his face was dead white and he was quite drunk..." (412). In this instance, the whiskey bottle becomes representative of young Bayard's disconnection from his entire life. The whiskey does not "go around" to the other people at the table the way the jug does among the young men in Jefferson, nor does it spiritually unite him with others like the toddies the Sartoris family shares. The whiskey bottle stands alone, just as Bayard chooses to be.

In every occurrence of alcohol consumption, the reader is given a glimpse into the character's development. The toddy drinkers view their ritual as a sacred event that unifies their families and reinforces their routine existences and connections to the past. The men who drink from the jug find equality and brotherhood with one another. But young Bayard eludes each of these categories by moving seamlessly in and out of them. He is a part of these cultures, yet he somehow does not belong. Ultimately, young Bayard removes himself completely from any form of community and adopts the alienation he feels within himself by drinking his whiskey alone. This continuum of alcohol symbolism that Bayard explores thereby attests to his simultaneous

affiliation with and from his own culture, one of the strongest themes throughout Faulkner's novels.

#### Works Cited

Faulkner, William. *Flags in the Dust*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.