

GRANNY

Steve Leege

(1) Granny played one of the more interesting roles in Faulkner's The Unvanquished, and the war played an interesting role in respect to Granny. It had a major effect on her life and induced many changes in her--physically, socially, and spiritually. A tough, enduring, old lady, Granny weathered the conflicts of the North and South in surprising fashion, only to lose her life in a most unglorious manner.

(2) First of all, a statement about Granny's character and values is needed to understand what she went through. She held to all basic moral and religious traditions of women of the South. Her dress, public manner, and speech complied with all standards of her day. She attended church regularly despite the fact that her church had no regular minister of her faith. She had more compassion for the poor than could be expected of an individual in her position. She believed in truth and justice and oftentimes went to great lengths to correct wrongdoings. She was in a class by herself. Of all these things she held dear, her faith would be most tested as a result of the war, because it was her faith on which she built her life.

(3) Faulkner portrays the other women of her day with many of these same characteristics, but the lengths by which they tried to prevent any changes made them seem cold, ruthless, and uncaring. Their ultimate concern was for their image. For example, when the controversy surrounding Drusilla's relationship with John Sartoris became known, the women of Jefferson and Aunt Louisa forced the marriage in an attempt to save face--not Drusilla's but their own.

Granny was concerned with her image as well, but by no means let it control her life to the point that it became her life. Circumstances forced Granny to make changes in her life which she did not resist. But because her convictions and character were solid to the core, the changes she went through were acceptable. They continued to build her character, while in the others, character was destroyed.

(4) When the war hit Granny, it caught her in mid-stride. She had little or no time to react, no time to think. Bayard and Ringo had just ambushed a Union soldier and all hell had broken loose. They ran to her for protection with the enemy in hot pursuit. Granny's instincts took over when the soldiers appeared, and she told a lie. Lying was something that did not come easy to her; in fact, it was something that didn't come at all in normal circumstances. But the circumstances were far from normal, and she reacted in the only possible manner. If she had not lied as to the whereabouts of Bayard and Ringo, they might not have had a very happy childhood, if any had been left them at all. Granny reacted to protect them; but, when the soldiers left, the old values regained control. She knelt down with the boys and asked to be forgiven for her sin. This was but a prelude of what was to come: she would kneel more than once to acknowledge sin.

(5) This exacted a massive physical toll from Granny. However, due to a driving spirit, she rarely allowed anyone to find out. The two best examples of her physical decay occur before the inception of her mule-ring and at the time of her death. Granny passed out as she, Bayard and Ringo crossed the river, surrounded by Negroes. When she came to, Bayard understood for the first time what she really was: "I hadn't realized how old and little she was" (p. 123). She was just a frail, old lady, but because of the way she carried herself, her grandson had never really understood that. At

her death, Bayard again perceives her weakness: "She looked like she had collapsed, like she had been made out of a lot of little thin, dry, light sticks notched together and braced with cord, and now the cord had broken and all the little sticks had collapsed in a quiet heap on the floor" (p. 175). Granny had literally been skin and bones; nothing but the will to succeed tied her into a person. When that was cut, the pieces she had held together all that time fell into a withered bundle. However, her death was anticlimactic: for it was what she did in life, about life, not something to be gleaned from her death, that was important.

(6) The war caused a number of major changes in both her family and social roles. With the absence of Colonel Sartoris, she became the authority figure of the Sartoris household and was responsible for Bayard's upbringing. She became active in the social and economic affairs of her community. In the established roles of the South at the time, she took on, in effect, the responsibilities of a male. Women of today assume such roles with scarcely a backward glance from their peers; in Granny's era, such role reversals were frowned upon, if not prevented. But because the war had disrupted peoples' lives, Granny took on these roles with no opposition. She by no means took advantage of the situation, she merely reacted in the only possible manner under the circumstances. Few if any women of her day would, or could, have done the same. She felt that the need to aid those who had lost much, if not all, of their livelihoods to the war was greater than maintaining traditional female standing. So her operation of loaning money and mules to them, with which they could rebuild, became a flourishing enterprise although at the same time it compromised many of Granny's principles.

(7) The Union army presented her with an intriguing problem. When she tried to recover her lost silver, mules, and slaves and to return the borrowed horses, she got a little more than she bargained for: ten chests of silver, one hundred and ten mules, and one hundred and ten slaves. But because she felt it was the hand of God intervening in her behalf, she didn't try to rectify the mistake but proceeded instead to make the best of it.

(8) Her best was very good indeed. She helped all the poor in her area by lending them mules and money with which they could rebuild their shattered existence. In doing so, Granny managed to break almost every rule by which she lived. But by doing so, she allowed herself to be a true individual with a real sense of purpose. Granny dealt with Ringo, a slave, as an equal. For someone who was used to giving orders, asking for help was very unnerving. But she realized that to achieve her desired ends, compromises had to be made and elevating Ringo's position was one of them. Another, more obvious compromise and the one that hurt her most, was the fact that she needed to deceive and steal from her fellow man in order to continue to make money to loan to her needy friends. To do so was to break her basic ideals of faith, in God and in herself. Every time she went into a Union camp to requisition mules, she had to put her religious and moral feelings aside. Granny would have preferred not to break the commandments, but there was no other way. In her opinion, God didn't seem to be fulfilling His duties, so Granny decided to help Him out. However, when the operation finally came to an end, she did the only thing she could. She took Bayard and Ringo to the church to explain to God her actions and to justify them.

'I have sinned. I have stolen, and I have borne false witness against my neighbor, though that

neighbor was an enemy of my country. And more than that, I have caused these children to sin. I hereby take their sins upon my conscience.' It was one of those bright soft days. It was cool in the church; the floor was cold to my knees. There was a hickory branch just outside the window, turning yellow; when the sun touched it, the leaves looked like gold. 'But I did not sin for gain or for greed,' Granny said. 'I did not sin for revenge. I defy You or anyone to say I did. I sinned first for justice. And after that first time, I sinned for more than justice; I sinned for the sake of food and clothes for Your own creatures who could not help themselves--for children who had given their fathers, for wives who had given their husbands, for old people who had given their sons to a holy cause, even though You have seen fit to make it a lost cause. What I gained, I shared with them. It is true that I kept some of it back, but I am the best judge of that because I, too, have dependents who may be orphans, too, at this moment, for all I know. And if this be sin in Your sight, I will take this on my conscience too. Amen.'

(pp. 167-68)

(9) Granny explained that her sins had been for the good of the people, for all those who needed help after the war had taken something from them. Also, as if she had been some type of Christ figure, Granny took upon herself the sins of both Bayard and Ringo. Because she caused them to sin, she wasn't going to let God punish them; she would take their place if God planned to retaliate. The most interesting aspect of her prayer is not in the text of her prayer but in her failure to include the obvious. Nowhere did she mention or ask for forgiveness; all she did was take sins upon her conscience. It gives the impression that Granny no longer felt subordinate to God but was acting as His equal. Still, it should be noted that the simple act of kneeling to God in prayer was itself an acknowledgement that she still believed him to be the Lord, deserving of respect and honor. Granny sinned and recognized the fact and made it plain to God that

it was all her fault. But she really was not sorry for having committed those sins, because of what they did for others.

(10) Granny was not superficial as were the other women in Faulkner's novel. She did not make herself out to be something she wasn't. She did not feel compelled to uphold an image that wasn't her own. She permitted herself to change, to react to circumstances. But in that change, she maintained her self-respect, her ideals, her beliefs. The other women: they were like dust in the wind, no direction, no purpose, no life. Granny had all of these. She changed when she had to and yet, she was always Granny in whatever she did.