

ANALYSIS

Mosquitoes (1927)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“*Mosquitoes* fails... The imperfect sympathy issues in satire—of the Snopes-world Bohemia that existed in the Vieux Carre section of New Orleans during the 1920s. Since this is Mr. Faulkner’s second novel, and since it was written just after he had lived in the Vieux Carre himself, while he was still under thirty, it offers another clear indication of the centrality of his traditionalism. It shows how great is the distance separating him from many of his contemporaries, such as, let us say, Mr. Ernest Hemingway. For *Mosquitoes* makes it very plain that if Mr. Faulkner is of the ‘lost generation,’ it is only of the lost generation of Sartoris. But it shows, too, that Mr. Faulkner is not an Aldous Huxley and should not try to be one. He is primarily a myth-maker; and there can be no such thing as a satiric myth.”

George Marion O’Donnell
“Faulkner’s Mythology”
The Kenyon Review I.3 (1939)

“*Mosquitoes* [is] an attempt to satirize the literary intelligentsia of New Orleans, particularly the group that published the little magazine, *The Double Dealer*, in the early twenties. The spirit of Aldous Huxley hovers over the novel, and Faulkner knows no way of making peace with it. He lacks Huxley’s gift for letting ideas spin and speed off on their own, flares of the mind that for a moment seem to acquire an autonomous being and, thereby, a kind of concreteness. Nor does he command Huxley’s gift for marshalling ideas for conflict. Ideas are surely important to Faulkner’s work, both as they inspire his own enterprise at some very deep level and as they spark the obsessions of his characters. But when he comes to a direct expression of ideas Faulkner turns sluggish and solemn, and when he tries his hand at satire, the trouble is simply compounded.

Some of Faulkner’s more worshipful critics, intent on beating blood out of stones, have found things to praise in *Mosquitoes*; namely, the theme they extract from it: that there is a radical disparity between words and action and that the former become empty, vain, and trivial when split away from the latter. No doubt this is the case, and if *Mosquitoes* hardly embodies this idea, it surely exemplifies it. This novel, the weakest Faulkner has written, is essentially a symptom of the unacknowledged envy felt by a provincial young man as he measures himself against those he takes to be cosmopolitan intellectuals. I use the term ‘provincial’ merely to indicate that, by reason of social and geographical limitations, Faulkner at the age of 27 lacked the cultural resources that would be at the disposal of many Europeans (I leave aside Northern) writers of a similar age. This provincialism is simply a fact to be recorded and assessed, the source not only of Faulkner’s weaknesses but also of much of his strength.”

Irving Howe
William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 19-20

“*Mosquitoes* deservedly received severe criticism and short shrift. A *New Republic* (July 20, 1927) pointed out its second-rate satiric ‘cleverness’ and its ‘labored sophistication’.”

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 15

“Mrs. Maurier invites a party for an excursion on Lake Ponchartrain in her yacht. To the invited guests are added, at the last moment, Jenny—a soft, placidly voluptuous and utterly mindless girl whom Pat, Mrs.

Maurier's niece, has met only that morning—and her boyfriend Pete, who refuses to let her go without him. Despite Mrs. Maurier's attempts to make the voyage gay and busy, most of the male guests, led by Dawson Fairchild, abandon the women to drink in Fairchild's cabin. The nephew, carving a pipe, finds that he needs a piece of metal and removes one from the engine room....

CHARACTERS

Gordon, *sculptor*
Mrs. Patricia Maurier, *wealthy widow who cultivates artists*
Pat Robyn, *her niece*
Theodore [Josh or Gus] Robyn, *Pat's twin brother*
Ernest Talliaferro, *widower employed in women's clothing business*
Dawson Fairchild, *novelist*
Mark Frost, *poet*
Major Ayers, *Englishman*
Jenny Steinbauer, *last-minute guest invited by Pat*
Pete Ginotta, *Jenny's boyfriend*
Mrs. Eva Wiseman, *divorcee*
Julius Kauffman, *her brother*
Miss Dorothy Jameson, *spinster*
David West, *steward on Mrs. Maurier's yacht*

PLOT

In the morning the ship's steering gear is found to be inoperative, and the yacht drifts toward land and runs aground. Pat, having made a conquest of the young steward, goes ashore with him early the following morning, planning to go to Mandeville, which they believe to be nearby. They spend the day first lost in the swamp and then trekking in the wrong direction on a scarcely used road, suffering from mosquitoes, the blazing heat, and lack of water. On board, meanwhile, Mr. Talliaferro makes tentative passes at Jenny, while she makes up to the taciturn but somewhat responsive nephew, as does Miss Jameson, whose obvious advances he evades coldly. Intermixed with the conversations that take up the better part of the book are a few other incidents, an attempt to pull the yacht off its sand bar, and the disappearance of Gordon and the search for him. On their return to New Orleans, the members of the party continue, more or less separately, to pursue the futilities they had followed on board. Mr. Talliaferro, believing he has found the secret of success with women, tries to practice it on Jenny; he fails miserably but resumes his endless speculation on the subject. Miss Jameson makes an abortive attempt to get herself seduced by Mark Frost. Gordon, Fairchild, and Julius wander the streets of New Orleans in an alcoholic haze.

ANALYSIS

A satire on the artists and literary lion hunters in New Orleans of the twenties, *Mosquitoes* is more important as a document of Faulkner's literary apprenticeship in New Orleans than as a novel in its own right. The idea of setting the major part of the story aboard a pleasure yacht probably came as a result of Faulkner's trips with Sherwood Anderson (the model for Dawson Fairchild in the novel) on Lake Ponchartrain. The tall tales told by Fairchild were cooked up by Faulkner and Anderson for their own amusement during their leisure hours. *Mosquitoes* is marred by faults that were apparent, but milder, in *Soldier's Pay*, published the year before; imitativeness in style and content, particularly of the satiric 'twenties' novels of Aldous Huxley, and an attempt at sophisticated satire, at which Faulkner is, at best, only competent. Smacking occasionally of Eliot...and of a rather outdated *fin de siècle* world-weariness, the novel is certainly a failure by Faulkner's later standards. Its only redeeming feature is the author's obvious ability to handle words.

Words form the main theme: specifically, that moral and emotional paralysis (Eliot again) result when words are substituted for deeds, when men are able to talk but not to act—when, indeed, action is refined out of existence by drawing-room conversation. Accordingly, Talliaferro, the most absurd of the major characters, is the one most concerned with the efficacy of words. He feels (apropos of advice to be silently

bold with women) that ‘to try to do anything without words...was like trying to grow grain without seed.’ So convinced is he of the power of the word to change the dimensions of reality that he has changed the spelling of his name from Tarver to its more precious form. The majority of the characters are word-oriented rather than action-oriented to various degrees. Most of the voyagers on the yacht are artists, dabblers, or aesthetes of one stripe or another, but Gordon, the sculptor, and Dawson Fairchild, the novelist, are the only two who are genuinely creative. Though Fairchild contributes a good deal to the weary conversation, his superiority to the rest of the characters is evidenced partially in his awareness of the emptiness of talk and of the paradoxical nature of words....

Bearing out [his] theory of the ‘happy conjunction of words,” Fairchild’s tall tales of the Jacksons and the swamp-sheep are among the best sections in the book. Fairchild’s tales serve as examples of Faulkner’s ability as a humorist, later to flower in *The Hamlet*. The satire of the rest of the book, however, becomes as tedious as the conversations that make it up, and as effete as the hollow characters that posture and prattle through its pages. With a few exceptions the characters are stereotypes, two-dimensional figures such as the rich and rattlebrained Mrs. Maurier, patroness of the arts; the pompous, vain, and ineffectual Mr. Talliaferro; the frustrated spinster Miss Jameson; and so on. Perhaps in an attempt to create a satiric distance between himself and his characters, Faulkner robs many of them of what little individuality they have by referring to them not by name but as ‘the Semitic man’ (Julius Kauffman) or ‘the niece’ and ‘the nephew’ (Pat and Theodore Robyn).

The conversations are largely on sex and art, the two topics in which the characters seem to be most interested, but the several weak attempts at actual sexual encounters come to nothing except mild frustration, and art remains uncreated in the void of talk. The center of much of the sexual interest is Jenny, who becomes ‘like a heavy flower, pervading and rife like an odor lazier, heavier than that of lilies.’ Though a relatively minor character in *Mosquitoes*, Jenny is interesting as the forerunner of Lena Grove in *Light in August* and Eula Varner in *The Hamlet*, both of whom are fertility symbols and placid, voluptuous earth-mother figures. The major example of initiative and action in the book—the niece Pat’s elopement with the steward—serves to emphasize the ineffectuality of all the members of the group. Confronted with the uncompromising reality of nature—the mosquitoes, the heat, the uninhabited and unmarked land, and the lack of water—Pat and David find their thoughtless pleasure jaunt turned into a nightmare of discomfort with which Pat is particularly unable to cope. The conclusion seems to be that even the young and relatively uninitiated niece is unable to exist outside of the artificial world of the yacht.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 129-31

Michael Hollister (2015)