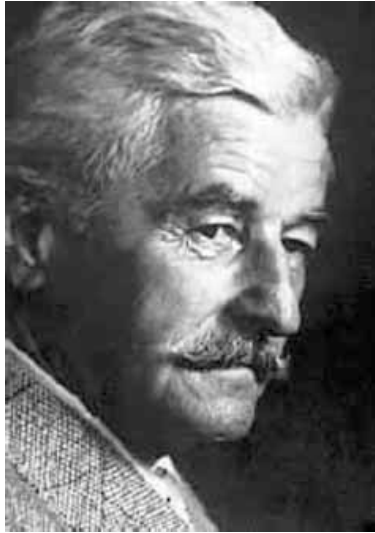


## INTRODUCTION



William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

William Faulkner, awarded a Nobel Prize in 1949, is probably the most admired American writer in the world today among critics and other writers. He maintained his stature even through the anti-literary, anti-white male Postmodern period. Faulkner remains the greatest American novelist because he (1) created so many original structures with significant thematic implications; (2) perfected techniques adopted by so many other writers; (3) originated a distinctive prose style that with the exception of Hemingway's became the most influential in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; (4) wrote more masterpieces than any other novelist except Henry James—including *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Wild Palms*, and *The Hamlet*; (5) is the most prolific allegorist since Hawthorne; (6) conveyed a profoundly important historical vision including race relations; (7) invented a fictional world more comprehensive, humane, vivid and evocative than that of any rival; and (8) also wrote one of the greatest short novels in *The Bear* and a dozen world class short stories, in particular "A Justice," "Red Leaves," "A Rose for Emily," "That Evening Sun," and "An Odor of Verbena."

The diversity in Faulkner is reflected in comparisons of his work to the Old Testament, Greek drama, Swift, Stendhal, Keats, Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert, Dostoevski, Tolstoy, James, Twain, Zola, Mallarme, Conrad, Proust, Lawrence, Huxley, Kafka, Eliot, Yeats, and Joyce. Faulkner changed the spelling of his name from Falkner as if to dissociate himself from slaveholding, as Hawthorne changed the spelling of his name from Hathorne to dissociate himself from the guilt of his ancestors. Faulkner is to the South what Hawthorne is to New England and Cather is to the West. He is like the young Ike McCaslin in *The Bear*, who learns a moral code as a hunter, experiences the divine in Nature and grows up a pantheist. Faulkner believes in Nature, evolution and the supreme importance of the spirit. Although he emphasizes determinism, he affirms and celebrates free will, most clearly in "An Odor of Verbena." Faulkner is a Christian Existentialist like Eliot and Hemingway and his fiction abounds in Christ-evoking figures, most obviously in *A Fable*. He declared his agrarian pastoralism by naming his mythical town Jefferson and he risked his life promoting civil rights for blacks in Mississippi. In aesthetics he is a Modernist in the mode of experimental Expressionism.

## BIOGRAPHY

William Faulkner was born in Mississippi, the oldest of four brothers. "I grew up with Negro children, my foster mother was a Negro woman, I slept in her bed and the Negro children and I slept in the same bed together." His black foster mother was Mammy Caroline Barr (1840-1940) "who was born in slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love." She was the model for Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner grew up in Oxford, where his father Murray ran a livery stable, a hardware store, and the business office of the University of Mississippi. His father was considered a failure compared to his illustrious ancestors. Faulkner said he more or less grew up in his father's livery stable. He rode horses all his life. He was devoted to his cultured mother Maud and all her life he visited her every day he was in Oxford, whereas he hated his father, a cold man who belittled him and called him "snake lips."

On the galleries of stores around the town square young Bill listened to old veterans of the Civil War tell stories about the war, then he went on to become the greatest storyteller of them all. His great-grandfather had come to Mississippi in 1839, a legendary pioneer, railroad builder, colonel of a Mississippi regiment during the Civil War, and author of a bestselling novel, *The White Rose of Memphis* (1880). He once stabbed two men to death in self-defense in a feud and in 1889 was shot to death himself on a public street by a former business partner, the source of an incident in "An Odor of Verbena." The Civil War is the main historical event in Faulkner, and race relations, the loss of wilderness and the decay of the aristocratic order of the Old South in the spiritually decadent modern world became his main subjects.

## EDUCATION

Faulkner was a good student until age 10, then he lost interest. He liked to claim that he quit after the sixth grade. "I don't have enough education. I don't know anything about ideas, to write an essay....Like all uneducated people, I have a certain distrust of ideas....I would depend on what my heart tells me, not on what my mind tells me, because I have no confidence in my brain."

"I ain't a literary man....I think of myself as a farmer, not a writer." He satirizes formal education in *The Hamlet* and often depicts educated characters as amoral fools dissociated from their hearts like Herbert Head and idiotic like Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, whereas Benjy the literal idiot, "he know more than folks thinks." The most intellectual character in *As I Lay Dying*, Darl Bundren, cannot adapt to reality and goes mad. Faulkner did not graduate from high school, dropping out in his final year after playing through the football season as the first-string quarterback. He read classics independently, especially the English Romantic poets, guided by a friend who had attended Yale. He hung around the University of Mississippi in 1916-17 and though he did not enroll he published some line drawings in two school yearbooks, mannered in the languid chic style of Aubrey Beardsley and the fashionable magazines of the day.

## WORLD WAR I

Faulkner worked as a bookkeeper in his grandfather's bank until World War I when he tried to enlist in the Army Air Corps only to be rejected for being too short and lightweight (5'5 1/2"). So he went up to Canada in 1918 and joined its Air Force. He had just completed his training when the war ended before he got sent overseas. He always regretted that. After the war in 1919 he returned home with a limp and a cane. He allowed people to think that he had been injured in the war when his plane crashed in France. All his life he did not bother to correct misinformation about himself and encouraged legends, partly just for the humor of it. Actually, he claimed, on Armistice Day he celebrated by getting drunk and taking up a training plane: "executed some reasonably adroit chandelles, an Immelman or two, and part of what could easily have turned out to be a nearly perfect loop [but] a hangar got in the way and I flew through the roof and ended up hanging in the rafters." However, his biographer thinks he made that up. He later wrote several stories about WWI as well as the grand philosophical finale of his career, *A Fable* (1954).

Back home, Faulkner did not feel like going to work. "Now he was home again and not at home, or at least not able to accept the postwar world." In 1919 he published his first poem, "L'Apres-Midi d'une Faune," in *The New Republic* and his first story, "Landing in Luck," in the University of Mississippi

campus newspaper. Yielding to pressure from his father, he enrolled at the University and attended for a year by special dispensation for returned troops, studying European languages mainly. He flunked a course in English. No surprise. Steinbeck got a D in English at Stanford and Fitzgerald never learned to spell. Faulkner's diverse styles in his fiction ignore the grammar handbooks.

#### BOHEMIAN

In Oxford he played the role of literary eccentric. He grew a beard, smoked a pipe, wore a tweed jacket with wrinkled khaki pants, carried a walking stick and became known as Count No Count. He hung around the drugstore, painted houses and did odd jobs. "By temperament," he said, "I'm a vagabond and a tramp." Townspeople thought he was lazy and would never amount to much, like his father: "All my relations and fellow townsmen...prophesied I'd never be more than a bum."

#### NEW YORK

In 1920 he spent six months in New York City clerking in a bookstore managed by Elizabeth Prall, who was soon to marry Sherwood Anderson. According to her, "He was an excellent book salesman, almost insulting customers who picked up what he considered worthless books, and pressing better books upon them with the words, 'Don't read that trash; read this.'" New York epitomized to Faulkner the urban civilization of the North and its "mad steeplechase toward nothing everywhere." He hated it. He saw urban modern man as a new kind of slave—ironically—a materialist like Jason Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* always driving himself to get ahead, on an absurd journey to the grave, as he elaborates in *As I Lay Dying*. He embodied prevailing modern values in Popeye, the impotent gangster in *Sanctuary*, who wears a hat like a modern lampshade and has eyes like the rubber knobs on vending machines. Geography is symbolic of the psyche in Faulkner, most explicitly in "Delta Autumn": the North is the dissociated Head, the South the corrupted Heart.

#### POET IN THE POST OFFICE

He returned home to Oxford and got a job as postmaster in the tiny University of Mississippi post office. Eudora Welty came in to buy a stamp: "We knock and then we pound, and then we pound again and there's not a sound back there. So we holler his name, and at last here he is, William Faulkner. We interrupted him....When he should have been putting up the mail and selling stamps at the window up front, he was out of sight in the back writing lyric poems." His brother John once said, "My brother is the most even-tempered man in the world. Mad as a hornet all the time." In 1924 Faulkner quit the post office: "As long as I live under the capitalistic system I expect to have my life influenced by the demands of moneyed people. But I will be damned if I propose to be at the beck and call of every itinerant scoundrel who has two cents to invest in a postage stamp. This sir, is my resignation."

Yet he made time to volunteer as a Boy Scoutmaster. At first, Faulkner intended to become a poet, "A poet without education, only instinct and a fierce conviction and belief in the worth and truth of what he was doing." His first book, self-published, was a collection of poems influenced heavily by Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), yet was described later by critics as provincial and Romantic. Another strong influence upon him is suggested by the fact that his first book is called *The Marble Faun* (1924), the same title as Hawthorne's last book (1860). He linked himself to Hawthorne in literary history. Poetic forms proved to be too confining. Only when he began to write prose in larger forms was he able to fully exploit his protean genius for language. "My prose is really poetry."

#### NEW ORLEANS

In 1925 Faulkner spent six months living in the French Quarter of New Orleans, which figures in novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* He worked for a New Orleans bootlegger, on a Gulf of Mexico shrimp trawler, and on Atlantic Ocean freighters as a deck hand. He also flew an airplane with barnstormers. While sharing a garret with the painter William Spratling just off Jackson Square, the two amused themselves by competing at marksmanship. Through an upstairs window they shot pedestrians in the butt with a BB gun and kept score. The garret is now a small Faulkner museum and bookstore.

Most important to literary history, Faulkner met Sherwood Anderson in New Orleans. Anderson was an affable hippie type who wrote in the mornings and drank in the afternoons. He had revolutionized the short story with *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), whereas Faulkner was still a nobody. “One day during [those months] while we walked and talked in New Orleans—or Anderson talked and I listened—I found him sitting on a bench in Jackson Square....Then in the evening we would meet again, with a bottle now, and now he would really talk....So I began a novel, *Soldier’s Pay*. I had known Mrs. Anderson before I knew him....She said, ‘Sherwood says he’ll make a swap with you. He says that if he doesn’t have to read it, he’ll tell Liveright (Horace Liveright his own publisher) to take it.’ ‘Done,’ I said, and that was that.”

#### FRANCE

He sailed to Europe in 1925 and went on a walking tour for six months, mainly in France. Due in part to the French influence in New Orleans, Faulkner gravitated to France while Hemingway gravitated to Spain. He felt like a “failed poet” and he had begun working on a novel about an artist that he never finished. In Paris he kept to himself. Anderson would have given him a letter of introduction to Gertrude Stein as he had given Hemingway, but Faulkner was reclusive and did not participate in the Left Bank social life of Stein and her circle, where Hemingway was the charismatic young writer considered most likely to succeed. “At that time I didn’t think of myself as a writer,” Faulkner later recalled.

“I was a tramp then, and I didn’t—I wasn’t interested in literature nor literary people. They were—I was—there at the same time, I knew Joyce, I knew of Joyce, and I would go to some effort to go to the café that he inhabited to look at him. But that was the only literary man that I remember seeing in Europe in those days....I read *Ulysses* in the middle 20’s and I had been scribbling for several years.”

#### FIRST NOVEL

Faulkner’s first novel *Soldier’s Pay* (1926) came out the same year as Hemingway’s first, *The Sun Also Rises*. Both novels were responses to World War I. Hemingway was two years younger, had already distinguished himself with the great short stories in his collection *In Our Time* (1925), and produced a far more appealing novel—festive, glamorous, exotic, sexy, and full of good times. *Soldier’s Pay* is gloomy and depressing, with the tone of an antiwar novel like *Three Soldiers* (1921), by Dos Passos. It got some good reviews, but did not sell well. Meanwhile *The Sun Also Rises* became a blockbuster success and a major influence on the young. Hemingway and Faulkner were to become the two leading American writers of the century. They had much in common, both were Modernists, yet they were opposites in aesthetics: Hemingway is objective and Neoclassical, Faulkner subjective and Expressionistic.

#### DIVERSE NOVEL STRUCTURES

Novels are structured and discerned by intellect. Faulkner never graduated from high school, distrusted intellectuals and claimed to be a farmer not a literary man, yet he created some of the most intellectually complex novels ever written. Most amazing of all is their diversity:

*Soldier’s Pay* (1926) is linear and vertical yet also centered. An American pilot who crashed (vertically) in World War I is returning home to Georgia on a train moving vertically south. His face is horribly deformed and he is revealed to be dying. His inevitable descent vertically into a grave is evoked by the predetermined linear movement of the train on its tracks relentlessly southward. Other characters define themselves by how they relate to him as he dies, making him and the idea of death the central organizing principle, just as the dying Addie Bundren is the center of *As I Lay Dying*. *Mosquitoes* (1927) is organized around a luxurious yacht. This is a satire of artsy hedonists in New Orleans who are invited to a party on a yacht on Lake Ponchartrain, written in the sophisticated tone of Aldous Huxley but with less bite. They resemble the artsy hedonists on the Left Bank in Paris depicted in *The Sun Also Rises*.

*Sartoris* (1929) is the first of his novels to be set in his mythical Yoknapatawpha County. It is episodic but focuses on one legendary man, Colonel John Sartoris, who represents the best in the aristocratic order of the Old South, but gets corrupted by killing in the war and after. The narrative interweaves past and present in the manner more elaborately developed later in *Absalom, Absalom!*, revealing how the legend of

John Sartoris influenced subsequent generations and events long after his death. “Beginning with *Sartoris* I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and that by sublimating the actual into the apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top.” *Yoknapatawpha* is “a Chickasaw Indian word meaning water runs slow through flat land.”

*The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is perhaps the greatest American novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has a Neoclassical structure like a plantation mansion in the Old South, but its content is stream-of-consciousness Expressionism: three subjective interior monologues by the Compson brothers starting with the idiot Benjy, followed by a section of objective narration that elevates the black servant Dilsey above the sound and fury of the decadent white family of idiots. In this novel, his favorite, Faulkner “improved” the stream-of-consciousness technique as used by Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922) by making it more selective, organized, and dynamic, integrating it with the mainstream of literary fiction. *The Sound and the Fury* did not sell well and he had to take a job working the night shift in the University power plant, where he wrote *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks. From 1929 to 1940 Faulkner produced a series of masterpieces in the most prolific display of literary genius since Dickens and Shakespeare.

*As I Lay Dying* (1930) is a mandala novel, circular like a Tibetan prayer wheel, with the dying mother Addie Bundren at the center as the *hub* and her children (including Vardaman, named for the mystic Vardamana) and husband and neighbors as *spokes*-persons radiating out around her, standing around her deathbed and revealing themselves in their reactions to her—Addie is the “I” in the title. When she dies, buzzards wheel overhead and the wheel of the family wagon breaks. The journey of the family wheeling her to Jefferson to be buried is as linear as they can make it, synthesizing the circular eastern view of life and history with the linear western view in a holistic vision. This is Faulkner’s most metaphysical novel, the one that most transcends the South, and the one most underestimated. For example, critics have yet to adequately discern the way the novel dramatizes the origin of various religious beliefs such as reincarnation in the sensations and experiences of the characters.

*Sanctuary* (1931) is a provocative shocker, especially the scene in which the impotent gangster Popeye rapes the southern debutante Temple Drake with a corn cob. Faulkner had increasing debts and seven dependents. He made enough income from short stories he sold to magazines to buy the old plantation he called Rowan Oak, but his novels were not doing well. He grew desperate to make some money and concocted the most horrific tale he could imagine. “There are some kinds of writing that you have to do very fast, like riding a bicycle on a tightrope.” After delivering it to his publisher he had second thoughts and felt the book was too cheap and would reflect adversely on his serious work. He took back the manuscript and rewrote it, turning it into an allegory of the North (Popeye) raping the already corrupted South (Temple). He retained his low opinion of the book as “basely conceived” because of his primary motive in writing it, yet some critics have rated it another of his masterpieces, comparing it to Greek tragedy. Most reviewers saw only decadence, violence and sadism.

*Light in August* (1932) has been compared to a medieval triptych in structure, contrasting the temporal with the eternal: The book begins and ends with the pregnant girl Lena Grove in the background of the violence in the novel, ironically evoking the Virgin Mary on the road looking for her Joseph and eventually finding a better man than the runaway father. She is contrasted to the orphan Joe Christmas in the violent foreground, doomed by something that should not matter. He is conditioned to be a racist, does not know whether he has black blood or not, and runs around in circles both away from himself and toward his tragic destiny—to be crucified as a mock-Christ whose death redeems nothing. *Light in August* is one of the most easily readable of the masterpieces and also contains some humor. The difficulty is in piecing together the life story of Joe Christmas and in understanding his motivations. Joe is a precursor of the invisible black man in *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison.

*Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is a mystery that reads like navigating a murky bayou. This is Faulkner’s effort to dramatize the whole essential history of the Old South in one book. The reading is slow and difficult, the facts elusive and the sentences often long. At Harvard, Quentin Compson and his roommate Shreve try to piece together the story of the legendary Thomas Sutpen, who rose from poor white trash to become owner of a huge cotton plantation with many slaves. Sutpen is the Old South. His tragic flaw, his

inhumanity, dooms him to lose everything. The primary sources of the Sutpen story are Quentin's father, representing the decadent Neoclassical tradition in the South, and Miss Rosa Coldfield, who represents the decadent Romantic tradition, like Miss Emily in "A Rose for Emily." Quentin has internalized the conflict between his father's cynical view and Rosa's moralistic view of Sutpen. This book is also an allegory of the creative process showing how history and historical fiction are written: Quentin (engaged sensibility) and Shreve (detached objectivity) interact in piecing together the known facts, evaluating the testimonies (Mr. Compson and Rosa) and adding speculation of their own to approximate the probable truth about Sutpen. Some critics consider this Faulkner's greatest novel.

*The Wild Palms* (1939) is two separate narratives in alternating chapters, opposed in almost every way, generating ironies. In "The Wild Palms" a middle-class wife and mother rebels against convention and runs off with a young medical interne in search of fulfillment in romantic primitivism and sexuality, evoked by "wild palms." In "Old Man" a prison inmate is called upon in the great Mississippi flood of 1927 to rescue a woman in a tree and a man on a cotton house, rescues the woman but gets carried away in the current. One couple gets carried away to the North by choice, the other gets carried away to the South against their will. One couple has sex all the time, the other is chaste. One man wants to live happily ever after with his lover but kills her in a botched abortion, the other man wants to unburden himself of the woman as soon as possible after helping her deliver a baby. The irresponsible man is the one who seems most law-abiding, the responsible man is a convict. One is a Romantic, the other a Realist. The conventional city man cannot adapt to Nature, the convict wrestles alligators and adapts like the hero of an epic. The most brilliant aspect of the novel is the consistent irony that spikes at many points of contrast between the two stories. Yet some editors have been so insensitive to the effects of counterpoint that they have broken the two stories apart and published them separately. In "The Wild Palms" Faulkner is a Realist satirizing what he saw as the Romanticism of Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), as indicated by the pun of a hardboiled journalist on amour in "a sea of hemingwaves."

*The Hamlet* (1940) is the first and by far the best in a trilogy about the Snopes clan, in particular the rise of Flem Snopes through heartless dealing from poor white trash to a bank presidency in *The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1959). The invading plague of Snopeses represents the displacement of the old aristocracy—Varners, Sartorises, Compsons—by unscrupulous poor white trash who rise to the top by adopting the prevailing values of the North. The worst of the Snopeses are more destructive than the predatory carpetbaggers from the North who overran the South after the Civil War. Flem is something you want to spit out, Ab Snopes burns barns, Mink is a murderer. Byron Snopes writes obscene letters rather than poems and robs a bank. Likewise no knight in shining armor is Launcelot Snopes, known as Lump. Other Snopeses evoke the values prevailing in the mercenary modern world—Montgomery Ward Snopes, Wallstreet Panic Snopes, and I. O. Snopes. Faulkner is at his funniest in *The Hamlet*, the most like Twain and Dickens. The novel is loosely constructed, episodic and pastoral, focused mainly on a number of contrasted male-female relationships, including the idiot Ike Snopes and a cow. The four parts of the book are unified by Flem rising steadily in the background and by his opposite the unambitious sewing machine salesman V. K. Ratliff traveling around in the foreground, a decent easygoing observer of Snopesism and one of Faulkner's favorites among his characters.

*A Fable* (1954) is a long, dense, complicated, slow-moving philosophical allegory set in France during World War I. It is Faulkner's grand finale, the most elaborate extended American allegory since Melville's *Pierre* (1852), dramatizing a tragic vision comparable to that in *Billy Budd* (1891). A corporal in the French army leads a mutiny that spreads among the regiments, who refuse an order to attack. Meaning is withheld by presenting characters objectively without judging them, while parallels among them and complementary patterns of behavior and thought emerge from interwoven subplots. This is less a novel in the usual sense than a group of set pieces that form an allegory of Passion Week: the Corporal is born in a stable in winter; his Magdalene also was a prostitute; he comes into the fullness of his mission when he is 33 years old; he has a group of 12 close followers, of whom one betrays him and another denies him; he is tempted by an offer of secular power; he wears a crown of barbed wire rather than thorns; he is executed between two thieves for treason against the ruling authority; and he disappears from his grave. Ultimately he is the Unknown Soldier interred with honor in Paris.

*The Reivers* (1962) is a picaresque comic adventure novel of a boy's initiation. Old Lucius Priest tells the story as it happened to him when he was eleven years old in 1905. Boon Hoggenbeck, who works in the Priest livery stable, becomes enamored of a newfangled machine called an automobile, persuades Boss Priest to buy one and to let him drive it. The adventures begin when Boon takes young Lucius along on a trip up to Memphis with Ned the black coachman stowed away in the back seat. Up in the big city Boon takes them both to Miss Reba's brothel where his girlfriend works. Most of the action is horse racing, the characters are colorful and there are hilarious moments, as when a sheriff arrests Boon for "transporting women across state lines for immortal purposes." This is Faulkner's most relaxed novel, easy to read and his funniest after *The Hamlet*.

## STYLES

Faulkner wrote in many different styles, like Joyce. He created individual styles appropriate to each of over a dozen different characters in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, where he articulates for the inarticulate, from simple to baroque, depending on the consciousness of the character and the situation. However, he became known for his distinctive, unique and recognizable personal style: very long complex sentences, effusive and full of abstractions, shifting back and forth in time, with long parentheses, allusions, figurative language, compound words, neologisms, emotive diction, and passionate intensity. The most organic example of this Expressionistic high style is in "Old Man" in *The Wild Palms*, where Faulkner's flood of eloquence evokes the experience of the convict trying to navigate the literal flood. One of his most spectacular displays of stylistic virtuosity is his parody of sentimental romance in depicting the idiot Ike Snopes courting and eloping with a cow in *The Hamlet*.

Since his style is so significant to the reader, it is ironic that style meant little to Faulkner: "I don't think that style is very important." What mattered to him was "The uplifting of men's hearts." Furthermore, he felt that words were inadequate and often misleading, as he expresses most clearly through Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*: "That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at." Faulkner's style often reflects his sense of the inadequacy of words, as when his sentences seem to be groping and reaching for the truth. Since the most significant truth is ineffable, he must evoke it, as in the scene when Ike sees the bear, using language intuitively while thinking mainly about characters. "I write about people. Maybe all sorts of symbols and images get in—I don't know." He valued plenitude and amplitude in the Romantic tradition: "My ambition is to put everything into one sentence—not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." And then he "tried to crowd and cram everything, all experience, into each paragraph, to get the whole complete nuance of the moment's experience."

## MARRIAGE

Faulkner proposed to his high school sweetheart Estelle Oldham, a petite southern belle. However, her parents did not approve of the match. Estelle was willing to elope with Faulkner, but he would not marry her without her parents' consent. Consequently, in 1918 she married a businessman who took her off to live in Southeast Asia. Faulkner was a romantic southern gentleman in his relations with women. One evening he persuaded a young lady to come for a ride with him by promising to show her a lovely bride in her wedding dress. He drove out into the country, parked in a dark orchard and turned his headlights on an apple tree in full bloom. Shy and self-deprecating, he compared himself to a reclusive hound dog: "You have seen a country wagon come into town, with a hound dog under the wagon. It stops on the Square and the folks get out, but that hound never gets far from that wagon. He might be cajoled or scared out for a short distance, but first thing you know he has scuttled back under the wagon; maybe he growls at you a little. Well, that's me." After Estelle he fell in love with a woman named Helen, but she saw the bearded poet as like "a furry little animal."

Estelle had two children, divorced her husband and moved back to Oxford. She expected to resume her relationship with Faulkner as if nothing had happened. He felt obliged by honor to marry her in 1929. On their honeymoon night at the coast, she tried to drown herself by walking into the Gulf of Mexico. At least they had drinking in common. Estelle had become accustomed to a high style of life and Faulkner felt obliged to provide it. For her children too. "A gentleman accepts the responsibility of his actions and bears the burdens of their consequences....Beginning at the age of thirty I...began to become the sole, principal

and partial support—food, shelter, heat, clothes, medicine, kotex, school fees, toilet paper and picture shows—of my mother...[a] brother's widow and child, a wife of my own and two step children, my own child; I inherited my father's debts and his dependents, white and black without inheriting yet from anyone one inch of land or one stick of furniture or one cent of money....You have to fight your family for every inch of art you gain—at the very time when the whole tribe of them are hanging like so many buzzards over every penny you earn by it....Apparently man can be cured of drugs, drink, gambling, biting his nails and picking his nose, but not of marrying.”

#### ROWAN OAK

After the success of *Sanctuary* he was able to restore Rowan Oak and became a farmer raising cotton, feed, mules and cattle. His daughter Jill was born and he bought his first airplane. He published *Pylon* in 1935, a minor novel about barnstorming pilots, one of whom dies in a crash. Later that same year his brother Dean borrowed his plane to barnstorm and died in a crash.

During the Depression of the 1930s Faulkner charged the black tenant farmers on his land no rent nor percentage of their crops. “The Negroes don't always get a square deal in Mississippi,” he said. He was teaching a writing class at the University of North Carolina in 1931 when a woman stood up and read a challenging passage aloud from *Sanctuary*, then asked him, “Now, Mr. Faulkner, what were you thinking of when you wrote that?” “Money,” he replied. On another occasion out in public a breathless woman asked him, “I understand that an author always puts himself in his book. Which character are you in *Sanctuary*?” “Madame,” Faulkner replied, “I was the corncob.”

#### HOLLYWOOD

In 1932, based on the sensational popular success of *Sanctuary* his agent got him a job at MGM in Hollywood to pay the bills. Faulkner later claimed with a straight face that he had wanted to write for Mickey Mouse. “I'm a motion picture doctor. When they run into a section they don't like, I rework it and continue to rework it until they do like it....I don't write scripts....I can work in Hollywood 6 months, stay at home 6, am used to it now and have movie work locked off into another room...It took me about a week to get Hollywood out of my lungs, but I am still writing all right, I believe....Maybe I am just happy that that damned west coast place has not cheapened my soul as much as I probably believed it was going to do....Everything in Los Angeles is too large, too loud and usually banal in concept—the plastic asshole of the world....Hollywood is a place where a man can get stabbed in the back while climbing a ladder....I don't like the climate, the people, their way of life....” He wrote a scenario for his story “Turnabout” that was released in 1933 as *Today We Live*. Faulkner's best known contributions to a movie are the bits he suggested to director Howard Hawks during the filming of *To Have and Have Not* (1945), the adaptation of Hemingway's novel about a smuggler out of Key West and Cuba.

During his stay in Hollywood he had an affair with Meta Carpenter, from the script department at Warner Brothers. She published a memoir about it after his death, *A Loving Gentleman* (1976), reporting that Faulkner would cover their bed with gardenia and jasmine petals and that he was “ravenous, carnal and female-intoxicated in the act of love.” One day Howard Hawks drove some friends out bird hunting. Along the way the star Clark Gable asked Faulkner to name some good writers. Faulkner named Thomas Mann, Willa Cather, Dos Passos, Hemingway and himself. “Oh, do you write, Mr. Faulkner?” Gable asked. “Yeah,” Faulkner said. “And what do you do, Mr. Gable?” After he left the Warner Brothers writing factory coworkers who cleaned out Faulkner's desk found an empty whiskey bottle and a scrap of paper on which he had written over and over and over “Boy meets girl.”

#### OUT OF PRINT

“There was...a small chorus of admirers, almost wholly composed of creative writers, and it was owing to their support that Faulkner was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1939. By that time, however, their voices were almost drowned out by a larger chorus of academic critics, almost all contemptuous, and by a deafening frogpond croak of daily and weekly reviewers. The public, which had been briefly excited by *Sanctuary* in 1931, had ceased to read Faulkner's work. Consider what might be



called his quoted value on the literary stock exchange. By the later years of WWII he had published two books of poems, eleven novels—each an extraordinary work in its particular fashion—two collections of stories, and two cycles of stories, *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses*, representatives of a hybrid form between the random collection and the unified novel; there were seventeen books in all. In eleven of the books he had created a mythical county in northern Mississippi and had told its story from Indian days to what he regarded as the morally disastrous present; it was a sustained work of the imagination such as no other American writer had attempted. Apparently no one knew that Faulkner had attempted it. His seventeen books were effectively out of print and seemed likely to remain in that condition, since there was no public demand for them. How could one speak of Faulkner's value on the literary stock exchange? In 1944 his name wasn't even listed there." (Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File*, 5-6)

## RECOGNITION

In 1946 *The Portable Faulkner*, selections edited with a discerning introduction by Malcolm Cowley, arranged the works in context and ignited Faulkner's career. Three years later he won the Nobel Prize. He enhanced his reputation with *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), more conventional and simpler than his best novels but the most popular with the public. When it got adapted and Hollywood came to Oxford for the filming, many of Faulkner's neighbors learned for the first time that he was a writer. "A lot of them don't know I write books, and they think I don't do anything at all. The bookstore in Oxford only sells school-books. The drug store down there has some of my books—some times." When townspeople began to read his books, some were offended and denied him service in their stores.

## NOBEL PRIZE (1949)

With strong European support especially from French critics, Faulkner was awarded a Nobel Prize for 1949 that was given to him in 1950. On his way to Stockholm to accept the Prize he got intercepted by a reporter who asked him what he considered the most decadent aspect of American life. "The invasion of privacy," he answered. "It's this running people down and getting interviews and pictures of them just because something's happened to them." His Nobel Prize acceptance speech was short, humble, somber, inspirational, and characteristically eloquent:

"Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." Like Hawthorne he affirmed "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and sacrifice." Most critics and reviewers were surprised by his affirmation of faith and thought it contradicted his writing, because they had failed to discern the positive implications in his work, such as the victory of Granny in "Raid," the heroism of Bayard Sartoris in "An Odor of Verbena," the salvation of Ike McCaslin in *The Bear*, the transcendence of Dilsey at the Easter service in *The Sound and the Fury*, and the triumph of Lena Grove in *Light in August*.

"I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty, is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

## FAME

Faulkner had always been reclusive. "I have deliberately buried myself in this little lost almost illiterate town." He was shy and felt out of place among literary people. He hated cocktail parties so much that he drank more than usual and once vomited while standing in a reception line. The honor of the Nobel Prize made him feel obligated to socialize, to accept invitations, to make appearances and to speak in public, in a soft southern drawl, at universities including West Point and elsewhere around the world—from Brazil and Venezuela to Greece, Switzerland and Japan. While he was a writer in residence at the University of Virginia his conversations with students were collected in *Faulkner in the University*.

## FRENCH ADULATION

Salle Gaveau, Paris (May 1952): "The program went along about as one would expect with sometimes perfunctory or sometimes hearty applause. The one variation from this pattern occurred when Faulkner was introduced by [Denis de] Rougement. Faulkner stood up; and he had to stand there for several minutes while the audience bravoed, cheered, and gave vent to their enthusiasm in true French fashion. As one French paper described the scene, 'The ovation enveloped Faulkner like a tornado—the applause of the single-minded crowd offered him a memorable greeting.' And it was this single mindedness that attracted our attention. This audience had come there to see and hear William Faulkner. They had come to the Salle Gaveau that afternoon as an expression of their adulation and almost worship of the writer William Faulkner." (Thelma Smith and Ward Miner, *Transatlantic Migration*, 1955)

## THE CURSE OF SLAVERY

"There isn't a Southerner alive who doesn't curse the day the first Northern ship captain landed a Negro slave in this country....And the South has got to work that curse out and it will, if it's let alone....I'm a States' Rights man." Throughout his fiction, Faulkner dramatized the consequences of that curse. "To live anywhere in the world today and be against equality because of race or color is like living in Alaska and being against snow....It is a terrible burden that the Negro has to carry in this country.... Just when do men that have different blood in them stop hating one another?...If a Negro can get a Congressional Medal for saving your son, why can't he sit in the same class-room as your son's children?"

## INTEGRATION

After the 1954 Supreme Court decision against segregation in public schools, liberals in the North demanded immediate total compliance in the South. Faulkner knew his neighbors and beginning in 1955 he published a series of letters on integration in various newspapers and in *Time* magazine. The most famous is his "Letter to the North" in *Life* magazine in 1956 in which he tried to explain the recalcitrant South to northern liberals and pled for patience rather than the use of force. He knew people were going to die. His letter to the *New York Times* in 1957 at the violent height of the high school integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas expressed his concern for the preservation of individual rights "Against that principle which by physical force compels man to relinquish his individuality into the monolithic mass of a state dedicated to the premise that the state alone shall prevail..." Faulkner pled for tolerance and national unity. He was a southern liberal whose advocacy of States' Rights was reactionary to northern liberals advocating more rather than less concentration of power in the federal government.

"I was against compulsory segregation. I am just as strongly against compulsory integration. Firstly from principle. Secondly because I don't believe it will work....We have had many violent inexcusable personal crimes of race against race in the South, but since 1919 the major examples of communal race tension have been more prevalent in the North....I get a lot of insulting and threatening letters and telephone calls since I established my position....all grouped against a few liberals like me. People phone me up to threaten my life at three or four in the morning—they're usually drunk by then....My friends say I ought to carry a pistol. But I don't think anyone will shoot me, it would cause too much of a stink. But the other liberals in my part of the country carry guns all the time."

## AMAZEMENT

“And now I realize for the first time what an amazing gift I had: uneducated in every formal sense, without even very literate, let alone literary, companions, yet to have made the things I made. I don’t know where it came from. I don’t know why God or gods or whoever it was, selected me to be the vessel. Believe me, this is not humility, false modesty, it is simply amazement.”

## DEATH

“You know that if I were reincarnated, I’d want to come back as a buzzard. Nothing hates him or envies him or wants him or needs him. He is never bothered or in danger, and he can eat anything.” In his last years Faulkner enjoyed working at the stable with his horses in the paddock, caring for his dogs and sitting on the gallery of Rowan Oak or on an iron lawn bench near his wife’s garden. In 1962 he declined an invitation from President Kennedy to a dinner for artists at the White House, explaining, “I’m too old at my age to travel that far to eat with strangers.”

Later that year, one day in June he was riding through the woods on Stonewall when the horse got startled, reared and threw him to the ground. He landed flat. At first he could not get up. His riderless horse appeared at the house and his family members had to set out and look for him. The fall injured his back and groin. After that he used a cane and suffered back pain, yet he continued to ride using a back brace. The pain got worse. He went to bed, took pain killers and kept drinking half bottles of whiskey to get a few hours of sleep—day after day. The ordeal wore him down until in July he had to be taken to the hospital. There, after midnight, he sat up suddenly in his bed—then groaned and toppled over. He died within an hour of a heart attack.

Faulkner was a Modernist in his efforts to transcend himself in his art: “It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books; I wish I had had enough sense to see ahead thirty years ago and, like some of the Elizabethans, not signed them. It is my aim, and every effort bent, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be: He made the books and he died.”

## IMMORTALITY

“The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life. Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move.... I have noticed in young people in America...there’s a certain feeling of shame about admitting the idea of immortality, that it’s a little archaic, the idea. That one should be up with the times, with the modern age, and to think of immortality as not only old fashioned but it implies a certain amount of ignorance.... Probably you are wrong in doing away with God in that fashion. God is. It is He who created man. If you don’t reckon with God, you won’t wind up anywhere....God fades away by the very act of your doubting him....Listen, neither God nor morality can be destroyed....I think the younger generation is badly confused, maybe more confused than any other national younger generation....Well, I believe in God.... To me, a proof of man’s immortality...that the idea of a God is valuable, is in the fact that he writes the books and composes the music and paints the pictures. They are the firmament of mankind....It is the writer’s duty to show that man has an immortal soul.”

Michael Hollister (2013)

When Faulkner writes a novel,  
He crowds the symbols in;  
There is a hidden meaning  
In every glass of gin,

In every maiden ravished,  
In every colt that’s foaled,

And specially in characters  
That are thirty-three years old.

John C. Sherwood

### YOKNAPATAWPHA COUNTY

Faulkner's mythical kingdom is a county in northern Mississippi, on the border between sand hills covered with scrubby pine and the black earth of the river bottoms. Except for the storekeepers, mechanics, and professional men who live in Jefferson, the county seat, all the inhabitants are farmers or woodsmen. Except for a little lumber, their only product is baled cotton for the Memphis market. A few of them live in big plantation houses, the relics of another age, and more of them in substantial wooden farmhouses; but most of them are tenants, no better houses than slaves on good plantations before the Civil War. Yoknapatawpha County—'William Faulkner, sole owner and proprietor,' as he inscribed on one of the maps he drew—has a population of 15,611 persons scattered over 2,400 miles. It sometimes seems to me that every house or hovel has been described in one of Faulkner's novels; and that all the people of the imaginary county, black and white, townsmen, farmers, and housewives, have played their parts in one connected story.

### INTERRELATED WORKS

He has so far [1946] written nine books wholly concerned with Yoknapatawpha County and its people, who also appear in parts of three others and in thirty or more uncollected stories. *Sartoris* was the first of the books to be published, in the spring of 1929; it is a romantic and partly unconvincing novel, but with many fine scenes in it, like the hero's visit to a family of independent pine hill farmers; and it states most of the themes that the author would later develop at length. *The Sound and the Fury* was written before *Sartoris*, but wasn't published until six months later; it describes the fall of the Compson family, and it was the first of Faulkner's novels to be widely discussed. The books that followed, in the Yoknapatawpha series, are *As I Lay Dying* (1930), about the death and burial of Addie Bundren; *Sanctuary* (1931), always the most popular of his novels; *Light in August* (1932), in many ways the best; *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) about Colonel Sutpen and his ambition to found a family; *The Unvanquished* (1938), a book of interrelated stories about the Sartoris dynasty; *The Wild Palms* (1939), half of which deals with a convict from back in the pine hills; *The Hamlet* (1940), a novel about the Snopes clan; and *Go Down, Moses* (1942), in which Faulkner's theme is the Negroes. There are also many Yoknapatawpha stories in *These Thirteen* (1931) and *Dr. Martino* (1934), besides other stories privately printed (like 'Miss Zilphia Gant') or published in magazines and still to be collected or used as episodes in novels....

### CYCLES

Faulkner might divide his work into a number of cycles: one about the planters and their descendants, one about the townspeople of Jefferson, one about the poor whites, one about the Indians (consisting of stories already written but never brought together), and one about the Negroes. Or again, if he adopted a division by families, there would be the Compson-Sartoris saga, the still unfinished Snopes saga, the McCaslin saga, dealing with the white and black descendants of Carothers McCaslin, and the Ratliff-Bundren saga, devoted to the backwoods farmers of Frenchman's Bend. All the cycles or sagas are closely interconnected; it is as if each new book was a chord or segment of a total situation always existing in the author's mind. Sometimes a short story is the sequel to an earlier novel. For example, we read in *Sartoris* that Byron Snopes stole a packet of letters from Narcissa Benbow; and in 'There Was a Queen,' a story published five years later, we learn how Narcissa got the letters back again....

### PATTERN

All his books in the Yoknapatawpha saga are part of the same living pattern. It is this pattern, and not the printed volumes in which part of it is recorded, that is Faulkner's real achievement. Its existence helps to explain one feature of his work: that each novel, each long or short story, seems to reveal more than it states explicitly and to have a subject bigger than itself. All the separate works are like blocks of marble from the same quarry: they show the veins and faults of the mother rock....Although the pattern is

presented in terms of a single Mississippi county, it can be extended to the Deep South as a whole; and Faulkner always seems conscious of its wider application....He is most effective in dealing with the total situation that is always present in his mind as a pattern of the South; or else in shorter units that can be conceived and written in a single burst of creative effort. It is by his best that we should judge him, like every other author; and Faulkner at his best—even sometimes at his worst—has a power, a richness of life, an intensity to be found in no other American novelist of our time....

#### COMPARED TO OTHERS

Balzac...seems to have inspired the [Yoknapatawpha] series...The horse-trading episodes in *The Hamlet*, and especially the long story of the spotted ponies from Texas, might have been inspired by the Davy Crockett almanacs. 'Old Man,' the story of the convict who surmounted the greatest of all the Mississippi floods, might almost be a continuation of *Huckleberry Finn*. It is as if some older friend of Huck's had taken the raft and drifted on from Aunt Sally Phelps's farm into wilder adventures, described in a wilder style, among...Cajuns and bayous crawling with alligators....But the American author he most resembles is Hawthorne, for all their polar differences. They stand to each other as July to December, as heat to cold, as swamp to mountain, as the luxuriant to the meager but perfect, as planter to Puritan; and yet Hawthorne had much the same attitude toward New England that Faulkner has toward the South, together with a strong sense of regional particularity. The Civil War made Hawthorne feel that 'the North and the South were two distinct nations in opinions and habits, and had better not try to live under the same institutions'."

Malcolm Cowley  
"Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*"  
(Viking 1946)

"The rhythms of Faulkner's imagination are too spacious—they can seldom be contained within a whole book—for him to achieve the symbolic or dramatic concentration required by the story. Where a 'natural' story writer like Hemingway secretes his meaning in a few phrases, a few spare notations of gesture and speech, Faulkner allows his impressions and thoughts to spool their way through multitudes of incident and labyrinths of language. Hemingway tends to see his material as an event self-contained and compact, Faulkner as a history sprawling into the past and future. Hemingway labors to exclude all but the barest essentials, Faulkner to pack in whatever may qualify, complicate and enrich. Hemingway turns to the moment of revelation, Faulkner to whatever made it possible and whatever may come beyond it. Hemingway tries to light up the living moment with a sudden ironic or poignant flare, Faulkner prefers to peel away layers of the past. The kind of imagination that dips into history and brings up legend or myth is naturally at home in the long tale but not likely to be at ease with the short story."

Irving Howe  
*William Faulkner: A Critical Study*  
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 262

"They had to differ, for the simple reason that they were rivals who—partly by the influence on both of them of their time—resembled each other in many fashions, great and small. Both of them had sharp eyes for landscape; both liked to go barefoot as boys and even as young men, as if they weren't satisfied with merely seeing the countryside but had to feel it as well; both were hunters by devoted avocation. Both loved the wilderness, lamented its passing, went searching for remains of it, and were proud of their ability to find their way in it without guides. Both returned in their work to many of the same themes: for example, the primitive mind, the mystical union of hunter and hunted, the obsessions of wounded men, and the praise of alcohol.

There were even trivial resemblances, as in the British style of dress and the British officer's WWI mustache that Hemingway wore in his early years and Faulkner all his life. They differed, however, in their attitude toward the craft of writing. Hemingway kept his inspiration in check, for he liked to know what he was doing at every moment. Quite the opposite of Faulkner in this respect, he sometimes sacrificed his genius to his talent. (Genius is everything that is essentially the gift of the subconscious mind—inspiration, imagination, the creative vision—while Talent is conscious ingenuity, calculation, acquired skill, and the

critical judgment that an author displays when revising his work. 'How many young geniuses we have known,' Emerson said, 'and none but ourselves will ever hear of them for want in them of a little talent'."

Cowley  
*The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories 1944-62*  
(Viking Compass 1968) 158-60

Michael Hollister (2015)

