

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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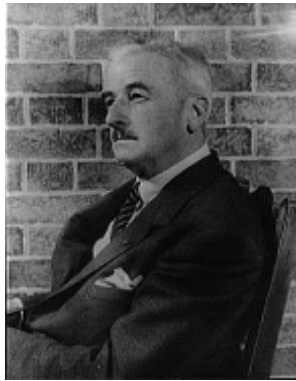
Chapter 7: William Faulkner (1897-1962)

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Source: [William Faulkner on the Web](#)

"The past is never dead; it's not even past."

- Gavin Stevens to Temple Drake Stevens, *Requiem for a Nun*, Act I Scene iii

"[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. It opened up a gold mine of other people, so I created a cosmos of my own." - WF

Winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, Faulkner's recognition as a writer came years after he had written his best work. Today he is regarded as an important interpreter of the universal theme of "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself." He grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, which became the prototype of Jefferson, in the mythical county of Yoknapatawpha, the setting of many of his works. Sometimes difficult to read, Faulkner experimented in the use of stream-of-consciousness technique and in the dislocation of narrative time. His fiction discusses issues of sex, class, race relations, and relations with nature.

Primary Works

The Marble Faun, 1924; *Soldier's Pay*, 1926; *Mosquitoes*, 1927; *Sartoris*, 1929; *The Sound and the Fury*, 1929; *As I Lay Dying*, 1930; *Sanctuary*, 1931; *These 13*, 1931; *Light in August*, 1932; *Doctor Martino and Other Stories*, 1934; *Pylon*, 1935; *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936; *The Unvanquished*, 1938; *The Wild Palms*, 1939; *The Hamlet*, 1940; *Go Down, Moses*, 1942; *Intruder in the Dust*, 1948; *Knight's Gambit*, 1949; *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, 1950; *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951; *A Fable*, 1954; *Big Woods*, 1955; *The Town*, 1957; *The Mansion*, 1959; *The Reivers*, 1962.

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A Student Project by Christa Pollex

William Faulkner was born September 25, 1897, in New Albany, Mississippi to Murry and Maud Falkner. His baptized name is William Cuthbert Falkner. Murry and Maud had four boys; William, Murry Jr., John, and Dean. William was the oldest of all the children. Shortly after Faulkner's fourth birthday William and Murry Jr., were nearly lost to scarlet fever. On September 22, 1902, the Falkner family moved to Oxford, Mississippi. Just two months after their arrival in Oxford twelve people were killed due to the yellow fever. All white residents had been evacuated.

Faulkner started to show his technique through drawing and writing poetry at an early age. During this time, Faulkner meet his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham, and his lifetime friend Phil Stone. Estelle was one of the neighbors' children. To Faulkner's surprise Estelle's parents sent her away to school the following year. Upon her last return home from school Estelle accepted a proposal of marriage from Cornell Franklin. In 1914, Faulkner met Phil Stone. One day Stone became curious about Faulkner's writing and read his poems with excitement. His reply to these works was "Anybody could have seen that he had a real talent. It was perfectly obvious.". (Blotner 162) Phil Stone encouraged Faulkner to write and thus started their long friendship, and soon after he dropped out of school.

Faulkner was denied acceptance into the U.S. Air Force so he turned to the Royal Air Force. On his application he had to change a few details like; the spelling of his last name and for his place of birth he wrote Finchley, in the county of

Middlesex, England. He also changed his birth date to May 25, 1898, and stated that his civil occupation was a student. July 9, 1918, he reported to the Recruit's Depot, in Toronto, for active service. In December, Faulkner is discharged from the RAF (Royal Air Force) and returns to Oxford.

Faulkner's return brought him back to school where he entered the University of Mississippi as a special student in September 1919. This is where he began to publish poems in "The Mississippian" and the "Oxford Eagle." During his time at the University Faulkner founded the "Marionettes," a drama club, in the fall of 1920. He tried his hand at play writing. He wrote a one act play called The Marionettes, but it never made it to the stage. Only after three semesters he dropped out of school, but he accepts a job as a postmaster at the University of Mississippi post office. Also, in November of 1920, Faulkner received a commission as honorable 2nd Lieutenant.

Phil Stone sends The Marble Faun to the Four Seas Co., who agrees to publish the book for \$400 and publishes it on December 15, 1924. In the same year, Faulkner resigns as postmaster at the University because of charges brought up by the postal inspector. February 25, 1926, Soldiers Pay was published. This was the start when many of Faulkner's works began to be published. Between the years of 1927 and 1934, he had a book published every year. In 1931, Sanctuary and These 13, two of his works were published. "Sanctuary is a brilliant novel, one of his best." (Kawin 31)

In 1929, Faulkner's childhood sweetheart, Estelle divorced Franklin and William and Estelle marry on June 20. In 1931, a daughter was born but dies nine days later and two years later, Jill, their second daughter was born.

In 1932, Faulkner goes to Culver City, California on a MGM contract writer. He also worked for 20th Century Fox and Universal Studios. He co-wrote for many screenplays. A couple of the screenplays he worked on were "To Have and Have Not" written by Hemingway in 1944 for Warner Brothers, and "Barn Burning" that he wrote and A.I. Bezzerides helped with the screenplay.

In 1948, Faulkner was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In November of 1950, the announcement that Faulkner had received the Nobel Prize was made. He also received the National Book Award for A Fable in March and the Pulitzer in May of 1955. One month before his death The Reivers was published and the following year he received another Pulitzer for this book. Faulkner died on July 6, 1962, of a heart attack in Oxford.

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Study Questions

1. How does the setting in a faraway age contribute to the mood of the story "A Courtship"? How do we know that we are dealing with an Indian narrator? Why is this an important aspect of the story and its total effect?
2. How does the location in a hunting camp function as an appropriate setting for the themes manifest in the story "Delta Autumn"? In what ways is Roth Edmonds meant to function as a representative of contemporary man? How is Uncle Ike different from his kinsman?
3. Examine *As I Lay Dying* from the point of view of family dynamics or social process. Is "Bundren" an identity these family members all share? What is the ontology, the way of being a Bundren? To what extent is Faulkner commenting on the American, especially the southern, family? Evaluate the perspectives with which the outsiders in the novel view the Bundrens. Which is reality? How does Faulkner demonstrate his characters constructing it?

"Barn Burning"

1. How does one establish individual independence as a teenager? Do you remember any crucial moment in your own life when you realized that you had to make a choice between what your parent(s) and/or family believed and your own values?
2. Is the destruction of another person's property ever something we can justify? Explain.

3. Does it matter that this story is rendered through Sarty's consciousness? What were Faulkner's options, and how would the story be different if he had exercised them?

4. What are the key symbols in the story, and how do they serve the thematic purposes Faulkner had in mind?

5. Do the class issues the story raises have any parallels today?

6. What is the tone of the story and how is it established?

7. Critics often associate Faulkner's portrait of the Snopeses with his perception that the "New South" following Reconstruction had lost its agrarian values. Analyze the particular "Snopesism" in "Barn Burning. "

"A Rose for Emily"

1. Discuss the ways in which Faulkner uses Miss Emily's house as an appropriate setting and as a metaphor for both her and the themes established by the narrative.

2. What are the different uses of the themes of "love," "honor," and "respectability" in the story?

3. Why does Faulkner use this particular narrator? What do you know about him? Can you list his "values," and if so, are they shared by the town? Is this narrator reliable? Does the fact he is male matter?

4. Many critics have read Miss Emily as a symbol of the post-Civil-War South. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of adopting this stance.

5. Those of you who have read Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* will see a resemblance. How does Faulkner's tale echo but also differ significantly from Dickens's?

6. How does this story handle the linked themes of female oppression and empowerment? What does it say about the various kinds of male-female relationships in American society of this period?

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