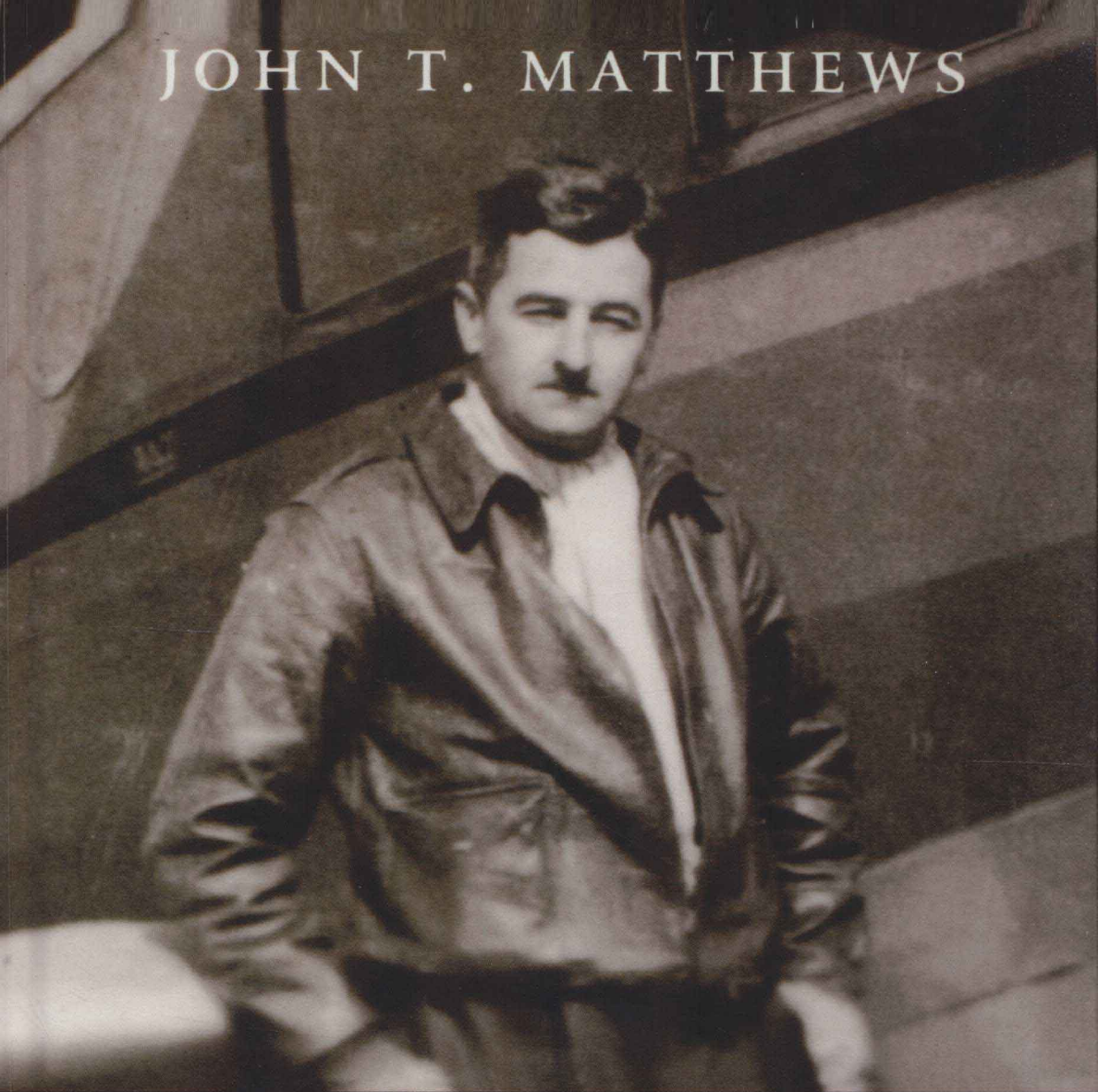


JOHN T. MATTHEWS



William Faulkner

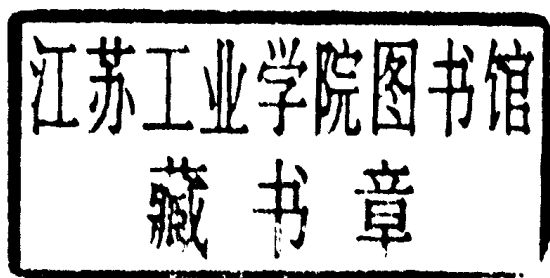
Seeing Through the South

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

William Faulkner

Seeing Through the South

John T. Matthews



 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009

© 2009 John T. Matthews

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex,
PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book, please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

The right of John T. Matthews to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks, or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Matthews, John T.

William Faulkner : seeing through the South / John T. Matthews.

p. cm.—(Blackwell introductions to literature ; 20)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-2481-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Faulkner, William, 1897–1962—Criticism and interpretation.

2. Southern States—In literature. I. Title.

PS3511.A86Z89163 2009

813'.52—dc22

2008020118

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10 on 13 pt Meridian by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong

Preface

Faulkner once remarked – in a fit of annoyance at having to provide autobiographical information to accompany an edition of his work – that he wished he might annihilate any knowledge of himself as a human being on the other side of the typewriter. That way there'd be nothing for the reader but the books. To write as if anonymous: that's the dream of an author who put all of himself that mattered into the words on the page. It's true that what we learn about any artist's life and times may enrich our sense of the created works themselves. In the case of Faulkner, readers are fortunate to have a number of excellent biographies, each examining different facets of his outwardly simple but emotionally turbulent life.¹ Most of these also give brief accounts of Faulkner's literary works and artistic career as they interplay with the course of his personal life. As well, Faulkner's stylistic inventiveness and his ability to imagine a whole fictional world full of extraordinary characters and stories have stimulated close study of his technique and themes. Faulkner's art has inspired analysis as wide-ranging, intensive, and original as that of any author in English. Interpretive criticism continues to find fresh meaning in Faulkner's writing and surprising new contexts for understanding its cultural and social environment. I have dealt with the abundance of specialized scholarship on Faulkner by trying to assimilate it as discreetly as possible into my discussions, conceding that it would be impossible to do justice to the many books and articles that constitute the professional body of work on Faulkner. I urge readers to explore the massive archive of criticism to discover how many other "Faulkners" emerge in distinct accounts of this hugely imaginative writer.

In my effort to survey the whole span of Faulkner's creative life, and to introduce readers to the marvels of his artistry, I try to honor his preference for concentrating on the writing itself. I proceed as if the books themselves actually were the essence of Faulkner's life, as I believe them to be. Biographies give us Faulkner's personal and professional life, critical biographies the evolution of his imagination. General introductions offer overviews of Faulkner's key concerns and achievement, while specialized analyses allow readers to pursue particular topics and interpretations of individual works. *Seeing Through the South* attempts something different: I try to present Faulkner's entire imaginative career as a distinctively coherent project. My study reads all nineteen novels and a number of the best short stories as inter-related episodes in a vast chronicle of a world becoming modern; it shows the indispensable rooting of Faulkner's imagination in the place he chose to live all his life; and it emphasizes how the US South was embedded in the history of global colonialism, in doing so suggesting what a Faulkner for our times might be.

Acknowledgments

It would be impossible to identify all the debts I've incurred in writing this book, since it reflects a lifetime of learning about Faulkner from the published work of other scholars, from lively conversations with specialists, students, and fans everywhere (including several on Boston trolleys), and from exchanges with numerous colleagues over work in progress. I wish especially to thank Richard Godden, Patrick O'Donnell, and Philip Weinstein for reading this manuscript so carefully in its final stages, as well as for friendships of a lifetime forged around our regard for Faulkner's art. I've benefited in countless ways from the collaborative teaching of Southern culture, including Faulkner, I've done at Boston University with my colleague Nina Silber, and from her own invaluable scholarship on Southern history. Leigh Anne Duck, Peter Lurie, Anne Goodwyn Jones, Donald Kartiganer, Noel Polk, and Theresa Towner helped me in a variety of particular ways for which I am grateful: confirming my approach, recommending more to read, correcting errors. Although the introductory format of this book prevents a full scholarly apparatus, I have tried to acknowledge sources for all material deriving directly from the work of others, and have attempted to mention as many principal book-length studies on Faulkner as space allowed. Nonetheless, I wrote this book cheerfully if humbly aware of how many other readers' ideas have become indispensable to me as I think about Faulkner. Those companions will see themselves on every page. I trust them to grant me the privilege of transmitting accumulated knowledge to readers just beginning to appreciate the writer we have cared about for so long.

I also wish to thank the many students at Boston University who have come to share my passion for Faulkner's fiction, and whom it has been my privilege to guide as they explored his created world. I've especially loved watching new dimensions of this remarkable writer come into view every few years in response to the changing interests of undergraduates and the shifting intersections of his imagination with the course of contemporary life. I've been blessed as well with superb graduate students through the years; they also will recognize the contributions they have made to my thinking through their hospitable yet tough-minded reactions to my ideas, and through the distinguished scholarship many have gone on to produce themselves.

My editors at Wiley-Blackwell have been extraordinary, beginning with Andrew McNeillie, who first proposed that I do such a book, and continuing to Emma Bennett, whose encouragement and support were unfailing, and thus decisive, as well as Rosemary Bird, Louise Butler, and Hannah Morrell, who superbly oversaw its final stages (which they must often have doubted they'd ever witness).

Contents

List of illustrations	vi
Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: <i>Seeing Through the South</i> : Faulkner and the Life Work of Writing	1
1 An Artist Never Quite at Home: Faulkner's Apprehension of Modern Life	19
2 That Evening Son Go Down: The Plantation South at Twilight	77
3 Come Up: From Red Necks to Riches	124
4 The Planting of Men: The South and New World Colonialism	172
5 Seeing a South Beyond Yoknapatawpha	225
Notes	288
Bibliography	296
Index	302

Illustrations

- Figure 1 Faulkner posing in Royal Air Force uniform (July 1918). Cofield Collection, Southern Media Archive, University of Mississippi Special Collections (B1F38). 27
- Figure 2 Faulkner in Hollywood (December 1942) by Alfred Eriss/Stringer/2870705/Getty Images. 53
- Figure 3 Faulkner in 1930. Publicity still for *Sanctuary*. Cofield Collection, Southern Media Archive, University of Mississippi Special Collections (B1F1). 120
- Figure 4 Faulkner boarding a flight to Stockholm for the Nobel Prize awards ceremony in 1950. Cofield Collection, Southern Media Archive, University of Mississippi Special Collections. Reproduced by permission of *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*. 239

— INTRODUCTION —

Seeing Through the South: Faulkner and the Life Work of Writing

We encounter William Faulkner in the twenty-first century as the greatest novelist America has yet produced. He may also be its most paradoxical. If Faulkner has become the United States' most influential world novelist, he did so while setting his most significant fiction in a single obscure county in the Deep South, and spending his whole life in such a place himself. He was a foremost international modernist, yet his subjects and characters are unimaginable apart from the history and sociology of what was the most backward state in the Union. He experimented endlessly with narrative structure, and developed a difficult unorthodox style, yet he described his goal as simply trying to get at the truth of "the human heart in conflict with itself" ("Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature," *Speeches, Essays, Public Letters*, p. 119).

Although such contrary features of Faulkner's imagination might seem to indicate the sort of genius that just transcends usual measures – think of him as the American Shakespeare – the purpose of this book is to show how his world's contradictions were a key to Faulkner's originality. Faulkner continues to speak to our contemporary world because his fiction described the seismic upheavals that formed modern life. Such disruptions caused a good deal of confusion and ambivalence, as one predominant way of life gave way to another. These changes seem commonplace now, and their stories familiar ones. But the sheer volume and degree of transformations can hardly be overestimated.

During Faulkner's life (1897–1962), America grew from a disorganized second-rate federation of regions into a modern centralized economic empire and international political giant. A primarily rural and agricultural nation became a vast network of metropolitan centers; capitalism developed from the simple production of goods for local markets into a system of national and international corporations. America expanded its foreign might by seizing its first territories outside the continent in the Spanish-American War in 1898, then pursuing a course through two world wars that made it a Cold War super-power by mid-century. Longstanding civil rights movements brought the vote to many women in 1920 and to most African Americans by the 1960s. Centuries of lawful racial discrimination came to an end. Sexual behavior was transformed by new social patterns fostered by World War I. Developments in technology reinvented almost every aspect of everyday life. Faulkner's father owned a livery stable in their hometown; twenty years later his son was flying airplanes. A child who grew up hearing tales about Civil War battles fought with saber and pistol, became the man who delivered his Nobel Prize speech four years after the US had dropped the first atomic bombs. Moreover, the events of modernity were hardly restricted to the United States. Throughout Western society similar changes were taking place, while across the globe peoples formerly controlled by European colonial empires began the struggle for independence and integration into the modern world.

It is not surprising that Faulkner's fiction should emerge as one of the most valuable imaginative records we have of the changes that created much of our present world. His novels, one by one, take up all the crucial elements of the event of modernization. In *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), his first novel, he concentrates on the way a traditional "provincial" society like the South's was violently inducted into a modern "cosmopolitan" one like the New America's after World War I. *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) tells the story of the eclipse of the South's landed gentry as a heartfelt tragedy; in his multiple novels about the Snopes family (starting with *The Hamlet* in 1940), Faulkner produces a corresponding comedy about the upward trickle of poor folk and the formation of a modern bourgeoisie. *As I Lay Dying* (1930) describes the awkward but determined journey of a family from its dying farm to the alluring town, while *Sanctuary* (1931) probes what Faulkner takes to be the horrific effects of urban mass entertainment and a culture of

vicarious spectacle. In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Faulkner descends into the painful history of the plantation system, one whose origins he rightly locates in the earliest violations of the New World by European settlers, whether in North America or the West Indies. Some non-Southern novels take up other alarming features of the modern age, most monumentally, perhaps, in *A Fable* (1954), Faulkner's ambitious meditation on the origins of the 1950s' atomic age military-industrial complex in the America of World War I.

Beyond the power of Faulkner's individual books, his achievement is especially remarkable for its determination to see a great multitude of local and discrete events as parts of a larger inter-related story. Faulkner organizes a lifelong creative project around the saga of an imaginary county in Mississippi that he calls Yoknapatawpha (its name a trace of the Native Americans who first occupied such places). By making so many of his separate novels installments in the description of an entire principality, Faulkner conveys the sense of the importance of region and history in shaping the lives of individuals. This is true particularly for a past-obsessed region like the American South, where many found it difficult to surrender the frustration and humiliation of losing the Civil War, along with a way of life they thought superior. As one of Faulkner's characters memorably remarks, "The past is never dead; it's not even past" (*Requiem for a Nun*, p. 535). But it is also true more broadly for all those global "Souths" that continue to find their way into modernity, confronting histories of colonial exploitation and dependence, struggling with racially complex societies created by the violence of invasion and slaveholding, and learning how to tell new stories in new ways.

Faulkner's situation as an artist and citizen generated tremendous personal conflict, perhaps the decisive element in his temperament as a writer. At the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the young Quentin Compson completes his harrowing account of the South by protesting, "I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" As Faulkner himself commented about *The Sound and the Fury*, he found himself having to "indict" the South for its grievous sins while longing to "escape" into fantasies of its glorious past. Such powerfully divided sentiments are a product of the massive dislocations of loyalty, faith, and knowledge produced by the shift from one social regime to the next. The bravery of Faulkner's life as a writer and a person was that he did not dodge

difficulty. He deliberately chose to live his entire life in Oxford, Mississippi, because it tortured him as much as it nurtured him. Unlike many other modernists who found artistic fellowship in New York or Paris, Faulkner set a solitary course. He lived sharply alienated from almost every intimate relation he forged, including those with his wife, his family, his lovers, his town, and his region. Personally, it was by living as an outsider within the world that had created him that he could represent the nuances of individual dramatic conflict with such authority and precision. Artistically, it was by subjecting his tradition-steeped Southern culture to the alienation of modernist methods for rendering time, language, consciousness, and history that Faulkner could figure out how to retell the stories of a place he knew too well.

Retelling those stories for national audiences became critical at just the moment Faulkner came of age as an artist in the 1920s. The South for a century had been locked into a succession of mythologies that exalted the antebellum ideal of plantation life, the kindness of Southern slavery, the nobility of the Confederate cause, the "natural" hierarchies of race and gender, and the honoring of regional pride over class conflict. In the aftermath of the Great War, the South attracted national attention for its racism (lynching remained a serious problem), anti-intellectualism (the Scopes "Monkey" trial occurred in 1925), and chronic poverty (Franklin Roosevelt called the South the nation's number one economic problem as late as 1938, toward the end of the Depression). Faulkner welcomed the destruction of such injurious myths and behavior, but he remained suspicious of what would replace them.

My subtitle, then, points to the several ways Faulkner fashioned art of universal appeal from his native material. Clearly, he saw human nature through the lens of his own experience, one defined fundamentally by its Southernness. In addition, his writing sought to penetrate the deceptions and delusions of a morally bankrupt and obsolete tradition, to see through its hypocrisies and pretensions. But in committing himself over decades to participating in, and bearing witness to, the difficult evolution of his South, Faulkner also determined to see the place he loved through its troubles.

Not much of this would matter, of course, had Faulkner not written some of the most breathtaking prose in the English language. As in everything, Faulkner made no concessions to simplicity. His conflicted sentiments toward the South, his determination to create the sensation of a long past alive at every point in a unified world, and the inscru-

tability of deeply-conditioned human motives and behavior – such aspirations place enormous pressure on the descriptive and evocative capacities of language. Faulkner's sentences arc across centuries, rotate endlessly around mesmerizing moments, turn familiar concepts inside out (one character grieves for a "nothusband"), and uncannily render characters' private thoughts as readable script. His characters ache with the burden of unwanted knowledge, their utterances wracked for admitting too much of what they don't want to acknowledge at all. It is the nearly inhuman devotion to making language exceed itself that creates the glory of Faulkner's difficult style. This is not writing for everyone's taste, but there is by now little question that it represents an achievement of the highest order, a coalescence of profound subject matter and originality of expression that embodies consummate literary artistry.

Imagine you are in your early thirties, and you've spent the first ten years of adulthood trying to establish yourself in your career. You won accolades for your early accomplishments, but fewer as you've gone along. One day you learn that your two biggest projects are being rejected, and that you're probably going to be demoted. On top of that, your fiancée announces it's time to get married now.

That was roughly William Faulkner's predicament as a writer in 1929. After concentrating on poetry during his college years, and getting one book of poems published, Faulkner had begun to sense that his real gift was for fiction. In 1925 he had spent some time in New Orleans, where he began to publish prose sketches in a literary magazine there called *The Double Dealer*. Sherwood Anderson, already a famous author, took an interest in the novice writer's fiction, and reinforced Faulkner's sense that he had a goldmine for future novels in the stories and characters the Mississippian had absorbed growing up. Faulkner lived in a small Southern town in an area where his family had been prominent for generations, from frontier times; his world was full of exotic, larger-than-life figures – many of them proud and ambitious, also hot-headed, violent, domineering, lecherous; others longsuffering, resentful, bitter; a few humble, conscience-stricken, honorable. Faulkner had been hearing tales about them from birth, so he always felt like a natural-born storyteller, with things to

say about the human condition that his peculiar part of the world could illustrate. By the mid-1920s he became convinced he had a gift for fiction that would enable him to write at the level of the literary giants he so admired, like Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Flaubert, Thomas Mann, and Conrad. And while no one was making money in the 1920s writing poetry, successful short story writers and novelists had begun to earn thousands of dollars publishing in national magazines and getting on bestseller lists. In 1925 Faulkner moved to New Orleans and started concentrating on fiction – first short sketches and stories, then longer pieces. Over the next three years Faulkner made a splash by authoring a pair of well-reviewed novels. This is easy, thought Bill.

But instead of Faulkner's career taking off, it seemed to hit a dead end. His third novel, *Sartoris*, appeared soon, but only after the publisher insisted on radical revisions and cuts – changes so extreme Faulkner agreed to them on the condition that someone else actually do them. He was finishing another novel, and believed it was his best, but he was also making it as true to his vision of what great art should be as he could. The result was a work even his best friends found baffling, and his publisher turned down. Accepting the possibility that this book was too innovative ever to get printed, Faulkner devised a plan to write a *really* popular novel instead, one aimed to capitalize on the recent craze for gangster fiction, laced with gunplay and racy sex. As he turned thirty-two, though, Faulkner got the bad news that his publisher found the new book so obscene he figured they'd both end up in jail if he printed it.

Now what? As bad as his professional outlook appeared, Faulkner's personal life had just gotten a whole lot more complicated too. Ten years earlier, the girl he had first grown infatuated with in grade school, but whose father had forbidden them to marry following high school, had gone on to wed an international lawyer, with whom she had had two children. In 1929, though, Estelle Oldham Franklin and her husband divorced, leaving her free to marry Faulkner. Soon the struggling writer became the head of a household of four; less than a year later he purchased his first home, a ramshackle pre-Civil War "mansion" that he began to fix up himself. In this tight spot, Faulkner called on one of his main traits: perseverance. He acted as he was to do repeatedly during the course of his life as a writer: he just kept writing.

By the time of his marriage in late June of 1929, Faulkner had already received some encouragement; *The Sound and the Fury* would be published in October by a new company headed by one of his former editors, though it was clear that no one involved expected much in the way of general critical appreciation or sales. Just as it was coming out, he began his next novel, *As I Lay Dying*, which he finished quickly, in January. By the time it was published in the fall of 1930, Faulkner had also been surprised with word that his new publisher was now willing to give his pop novel a go; *Sanctuary* appeared in early 1931.

Although Faulkner's career was enjoying a sudden boost, he soon realized that the more "literary" novels he preferred to write were not going to earn him the royalties to be gotten from sensationalistic books, like the ones he aped in *Sanctuary*. Even this one "shocker" didn't sell as well as he'd expected. Faulkner found that his income fell short of what he needed to support his family. By 1932 Faulkner had committed himself to two other sorts of professional writing: short stories and screen plays. Throughout his career these more commercial venues subsidized and informed his novel-writing, even as they interfered with it. Since authors might be paid as much as \$2,500 per short story by top mass circulation magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* – F. Scott Fitzgerald was one well-paid star – Faulkner got himself an agent, took some of the material he was producing for novels, and began packaging it as short stories. Throughout his career Faulkner carefully recycled his creative goods. Sometimes he would split off a piece of whatever he was working on and publish it as a short story ahead of the novel. Other times, since Faulkner was capable of holding vast narratives about whole families and regions of his imaginary domain in his head, he would publish stories years ahead of their eventual integration into novels. And sometimes Faulkner seemed to work backward, taking strands of published novels and developing further (or possibly dusting off) discarded or preliminary versions. Whatever the immediate method, Faulkner always spoke resentfully of the need to cannibalize his fiction, since it was only in his novels that he felt he was creating authentic art.

Faulkner's habitual frugality in the use of his creative work – paradoxical in a way, given the spectacular fertility of his imagination –

leads me to one of the organizational principles of this book. Faulkner's short stories tend to orbit his novels. But since he was designing them to appear in more popular venues, the stories treat their subject matter more directly, with greater accessibility. At the same time, Faulkner's genius never pandered to mass audiences or mindlessly followed commercial formulas; he compromised ingeniously on issues of artistry, never forfeiting the responsibility of presenting his deeply misunderstood part of the country in complex and subtle ways. Many of Faulkner's stories brilliantly recast his subjects from fresh perspectives opened up by commercial pressures. Often the stories play a kind of double game, reflecting on the very market conditions of modern culture under which they appear – especially the mass production and consumption of cultural goods, and the commoditization of human relations.

One of Faulkner's early short stories dramatizes the tension between artistic and commercial obligations. Written in 1931, as he was reconciling himself to the necessity of marketing his fiction to the magazines, "Artist at Home" brings two sorts of authors into conflict. Having struck paydirt with his first novel and bought a comfortable home in the Virginia countryside, Roger Howes represents the successful commercial novelist. Then Howes's prospects cloud; he suffers writer's block as he works on his second novel, while his wife Anne resents the steady stream of struggling writers and painters from Greenwich Village who show up to ask the secret of making art that pays. One of these visitors seems especially unlikely to prosper, a sensitive young man, apparently dying of tuberculosis (once known as consumption, and considered the disease of poets because of its association with John Keats), who writes poems about rejection in love and who scorns the bourgeois conventionality of the Howes's household. The tortured poet eventually declares his infatuation with Anne, who indulges his passion conspicuously enough to stimulate her husband's suspicion. The doomed John Blair expires, though, after standing vigil outside the house on the rainy night he nobly renounces his love for the other artist's wife. It turns out that Howes has been using the episode of his wife's infidelity and the poet's suffering as material for his new story. Inspiration turns out to be little more than finding the right experiences to feed off – the artist as parasite. Even the down-home narrator of the story, a local who appreciates little about the artist-types who invade his rural Virginia town, understands that Howes has