FAULKNER & HUMOR

Edited by Doreen Fowler
and Ann J. Abadie

Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha
1984

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TO
John Pilkington
Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus

Introduction

The impulse to categorize is a strong one, and among writers of fiction, there appear to be two clear and distinct categories: comic writers and tragic writers. Among the former, Mark Twain, the creator of undying boyhood fantasies, is typically grouped; and often numbered among the latter is William Faulkner, the chronicler of mansions and magnolias in a brooding Southern clime, a modern-day prophet decrying the decay of values in a crass, materialistic, modern world. But such set and exclusive designations can never adequately define or describe writers of the stature of Faulkner or Twain, who explode categories and clichés, and for whom reality is always continuum, a totality in which laughter and tears blend and merge.

While the essays in this volume explore various aspects of Faulkner's rich and inexhaustible comic art, they all hold in common one axiom: that William Faulkner, the recognized genius of tragic art, is a master of comic forms as well and, further, that neither mode, tragic or comic, is ever very far from the other in Faulkner's world. Among the first to recognize this merger of tragic and comic in Faulkner's art was Katherine Anne Porter who, in 1948, wrote: "William Faulkner has the deepest and most serious humor in this country at present." Porter's statement, which at first might appear to be paradoxical, in fact, expresses a fundamental truth about the nature of Faulkner's comic vision: Faulkner is always in touch with the potentiality of humor within tragic situations. Thus, *As I Lay Dying* is both a celebration of community survival and a bitter denunciation of community values; *The Hamlet* is both a comic folk epic and an investigation of mean-spirited materialism; and *Go Down, Moses* is both a twentieth-century comedy of manners and a probing exploration of Southern racial sin and guilt.

Examples of this tension between tragic and comic modes are in evidence throughout all of Faulkner's fiction. A typical instance is Cash Bundren's wagon ride in *As I Lay Dying*. For days, Cash lies, his leg broken, atop the decomposing corpse of his mother, in a wagon without springs. To ease the jolts to his leg, his family members make him a cast of cement. Stretched out beneath the blazing summer sun all day, his leg, encased in cement, cooks. That evening, to free the baked leg, the cement cast is smashed off and torn away, taking with it shredded flesh. Throughout his agony, Cash says only, "It dont bother me none." While the unspeakable outrage to Cash's flesh is unquestionably tragic, the absurd disparity between that outrage and Cash's hyperbolic understatement elicits a smile: we smile in amusement at the preposterousness of the human situation, but we smile also in recognition and celebration of man's limitless ability to endure that preposterousness.

Faulkner's humor, then, a humor which explores the entire range of human possibilities from communal celebration to sharp-edged satire, is the subject of the essays which are contained in this volume and which were presented originally in late July 1984 at the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference held on the Oxford campus of the University of Mississippi. At this six-day convocation, the eleventh in a series sponsored by Ole Miss, the conference directors tried something new—a new method for selecting conference papers was tested. In the past, recognized Faulkner scholars with a demonstrated interest in the conference theme were invited to lecture. For the 1984 conference, for the first time, a call for papers was issued and, from a large number of essays submitted, six were chosen for presentation. The winners of this competition, whose essays are included in this collection, are (in alphabetical order) William Bedford Clark, William N. Claxon, Jr., Virginia V. Hlavsa, Thomas L. McHaney, Nancy B. Sederberg, and Patricia R. Schroeder. In addition to the essays of these authors, a number of other papers are contained in this volume and were heard at the 1984 conference—these papers were delivered by invited

speakers. By choosing some papers for conference presentation from an open-to-all competition, the conference directors hope to encourage greater diversity and originality and to expand conference participation to a wider population. Encouraged by the results of this experiment, the University of Mississippi plans to continue the practice initiated at the 1984 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha conference: at future conferences, papers will be presented by invited lecturers joined by speakers whose essays were selected in a competition.

As arranged in this volume, the essays fall into two groups. In the first group, the essays take for their subject a single Faulkner novel and attempt to show how humor operates in that novel; these papers are arranged in chronological order according to the novel discussed. In the latter half of the collection, the essays start with an area of inquiry—for example, what uses Faulkner made of the tall tale or the funnies—and work backward to Faulkner's novels, making references to a number of different works.

The first two essays in the anthology explore the relationship between humor and humanity in Faulkner's tragic masterpiece, *The Sound and the Fury*. In "Humor as Vision in Faulkner," James M. Cox uses *The Sound and the Fury* to illustrate what he calls "the brilliant achievement of Faulkner's humor." According to Cox, humor and analytical interpretation are incompatible human responses, which in fiction ordinarily repel one another. But in Faulkner's fiction, remarkably, these two antithetical responses are somehow suspended in equipoise, side by side, countering and completing one another. The Jason section of *The Sound and the Fury* is a case in point. Jason, who is clearly ruthless, greedy, and vicious, necessarily evokes our harsh judgment; at the same time, however, Jason, who beats his breast, tears his hair, and loudly bewails his fate in extravagantly exaggerated language, is also comical. While this humor cannot exonerate Jason or reverse our judgment, it does serve to remind us constantly that Jason, like us, is human.

Picking up where Cox leaves off, William N. Claxon, Jr., also

discusses Jason's humanizing humor and claims that Jason's witty quips subliminally seduce us into sharing his view of the Compson family. But Claxon goes on to identify two instances in the monologue that are narrated entirely without humor: when Jason dupes Caddy who has paid him for a chance to see her daughter and when Jason destroys the circus ticket before Luster's anguished and incredulous eyes. According to Claxon, "the absence of humor here is as significant as its presence elsewhere." Previously Jason's humor had mitigated his culpability; stripped of this humor, Jason is exposed as a man who deliberately inflicts pain on the helpless.

Comic strains in two early works are taken up in the next two essays, "The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*" and "The Levity of *Light in August*." In the first of these essays, Patricia R. Schroeder identifies two comic patterns in the saga of Addie Bundren's funeral journey: at one level *As I Lay Dying* conforms to a classical model of comedy which celebrates social conventions, rituals, and forms contrived to impose order on nature; juxtaposed with this framework of classical comedy is another type of humor—black comedy or the comedy of the absurd—which enters the novel through the voices of Addie and Darl, two antisocial characters, who perceive the futility and absurdity of the social effort to erect systems of order. While Schroeder finds classical comedy and black comedy in *As I Lay Dying*, Virginia V. Hlavsa looks closely at *Light in August* and unearths buried references to St. John's Gospel and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. According to Hlavsa, Faulkner, like Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Joyce, often uses literary classics as the organizing structure for his novels. What, then, asks Hlavsa, is so funny about *Light in August*?—the fact that Faulkner's Mississippi folk have immortal forms.

Go Down, Moses, Faulkner's tragicomic novel about race relations in the South, is the subject of essays by three speakers, Daniel Hoffman, Nancy B. Sederberg, and William Bedford Clark. In the first of these essays, "Faulkner's 'Was' and Uncle Adam's Cow," Daniel Hoffman examines the hilarious opening

story-chapter of *Go Down, Moses* and shows how Faulkner borrows a plot from a rather crude, sexist Ozark folk tale and then "reverses, turns inside out, stands on its head whatever conventions he borrows or steals" to produce a tale which is both a comic masterpiece and a fitting prelude to a novel of tragic meaning. In "'A Momentary Anesthesia of the Heart': A Study of the Comic Elements in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses,*" Nancy B. Sederberg analyzes the mood, tone, and type of comedy that informs each of the story-chapters in *Go Down, Moses* and notes a change, a swing in the underlying comic sense. While in the early stories, the comic tone is light, merry, and anecdotal, in the later stories, comedy fuses with tragedy and comic elements function to temper emotionalism and to provide a more balanced perspective from which to view tragic events. In the last of the essays on *Go Down, Moses,* William Bedford Clark contrasts the comic impulse in Faulkner's novel about race and miscegenation with the comic stance of Mark Twain's comparable novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* and finds that, in terms of their comic spirit, the two novels differ significantly. According to Clark, the humor in Twain's work derives from a narrative voice which is wry, ironic, and, at times, even condescending, while Faulkner's humor in *Go Down, Moses* springs from an acceptance and an affirmation of the human condition born of a recognition of man's indestructibility at the bottom of the tragic abyss.

The remaining essays in the volume focus primarily on topics related to humor, rather than on specific Faulkner novels. Thomas L. McHaney, for example, takes for his subject the lie that tells the truth—the tall tale—which, McHaney asserts, in Faulkner's hands, becomes "a fine-edged tool in the modernist artist's battle against the regimentation, dull empiricism, and everydayness of modern times"; Hans Bungert, in a wide-ranging essay, touches on a number of issues including the German response to Faulkner and his humor, the methodological problems inherent in studies of comedy, and a typology of the various comic styles and methods found in Faulkner's fiction; M. Thomas Inge examines Faulkner's novels for comic strip references and

finds that Faulkner took from the funnies but used the material in his own way, working in a vein that was distinctly his own; and comic novelist Barry Hannah suggests a possible source for the small man in Faulkner's fiction—the little tramp, Charlie Chaplin.

The collection closes with two essays which deal with the building blocks of humor: jokes. In an essay that brings together Freud, Saussure, Lacan, and Faulkner, James M. Mellard analyzes the structure of Faulkner's jokes in terms of Freudian and Lacanian principles and concludes that all humor, like all art, exists because of the primal debarring of the signifier from the signified, consciousness from unconsciousness, desire from attainment. While Mellard focuses on the structure of Faulkner's jokes, George Garrett observes the placement of jokes in Faulkner's texts and finds humor where we might least expect it. In "'Fix My Hair, Jack': The Dark Side of Faulkner's Jokes," Garrett uses the executioner's famous one-liner in *Sanctuary* to illustrate his thesis that Faulkner's jests are never more than "a paper-thin partition away from the most tragic or poignant or pathetic or horrifying scenes." According to Garrett, jokes are almost always present, even in Faulkner's most serious works, because laughter is essential to caring, and Faulkner's aim, always, is to make us care. Faulkner, the brilliant humorist, then, is simultaneously Faulkner, the passionate humanist, "a great man whose vision was so open and inclusive that if he always felt the tears of things, he likewise could hear, as some hear voices, the sourceless laughter which is at least half the music of this world."

In addition to the lectures contained in this volume, the 1984 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference also featured a number of special events. On the first day of the conference the University Museums opened an exhibition of photographs depicting people and scenes of Faulkner country; The Friends of the Library hosted a reception honoring Mr. and Mrs. Douglas C. Wynn, who donated forty-eight manuscript pages of early Faulkner poetry to the University; the Theatre Arts Department

presented *Voices from Yoknapatawpha II*, dramatic readings of humorous passages from Faulkner's works; The Friends of the Performing Arts of Oxford joined the University in hosting a buffet supper at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Beckett Howorth, Jr.; architectural historian Thomas S. Hines presented a slide lecture at the Lafayette County Courthouse; and Square Books hosted an autograph party. Other special events during the week included a slide presentation narrated by J. M. Faulkner and Jo Marshall; a workshop for teachers conducted by Sister Thea Bowman; "Faulkner in Oxford," moderated by M. C. "Chooky" Falkner, and other small-group discussion sessions; a picnic served on the grounds of Rowan Oak, Faulkner's antebellum home; and tours of North Mississippi led by Evans Harrington, Beckett Howorth III, Howard L. Bahr, James Seay, and Frank Childrey. The John Davis Williams Library exhibited books, manuscripts, photographs, and memorabilia from the University of Mississippi Faulkner Collection and from the Louis Daniel Brodsky Faulkner Collection. Also, the University Press of Mississippi sponsored an exhibit of Faulkner books submitted by various university presses throughout the United States.

In conclusion, the editors of this volume wish to express their deep appreciation to all those who, each year, generously support the University of Mississippi Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference.

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Faulkner and Humor

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Humor as Vision in Faulkner

JAMES M. COX

Everyone knows that William Faulkner is a humorous writer, which is far from saying that he is a humorist. Because he is so much more than a humorous writer, it is not surprising that the trainload of commentary on his works has little to say about his humor.[1] It is so much easier in writing about him to struggle for the meaning, the answers to his riddles and confusions, and the philosophy informing his novels than it is to remember the incredible laughter at the heart of his world. Indeed, the very search for meaning, solutions to riddles, and informing philosophy is a way of forgetting the humor in his genius. Yet surely I am not alone in having laughed at his very greatest work. And here I am not speaking of having chuckled, or been amused, or having enjoyed immensely (as we are likely to say) Faulkner's humor. I am acknowledging having been broken up, torn to pieces, and brought to the floor in helpless laughter. I am thinking specifically of the Jason section in *The Sound and the Fury*, of almost the whole funeral journey in *As I Lay Dying*, the entire conception of *The Hamlet*, and the sequel adventures of the Snopeses.

The point to be made about this humor is that it is not a separate, subordinate aspect of Faulkner's world. It is, as I said, and as I shall contend, at the very heart of his world. Thus we are not talking about scenes of comic relief that provide relaxation to some tragic intensity. If we took the great episode in *The Hamlet* in which Ike Snopes is portrayed in love with the cow, we would have a text that might put us in touch with the humor. In that episode, Faulkner devotes an extended passage of such rich lyric

intensity to the description of an interior relationship between lovers that many a reader *on first reading* is likely to be well into the passage before discovering that the lovers are a man and a cow. Almost simultaneously showing the scene from the outside, Faulkner discloses the enterprising Snopeses charging admission for their neighboring countrymen to get a peek at the show. Faced with such an extreme example of Snopes venality, V. K. Ratliff, the central narrative consciousness, is reduced to helpless indignation at their depravity. Despite his attempt to claim for himself a degree of moral superiority over the Snopeses, Ratliff finds himself at the end of the novel falling for that oldest trick in the world of speculation: the salted gold mine. That ending shows just how much Ratliff is vulnerable to the greed he deplores in the Snopeses. To discover him digging feverishly in the front yard of the Old Frenchman's place is to see his presumptive moral judgments and his determination to best Flem Snopes collapse into the very earth in which he descends for money.

It is of course possible—even inevitable—to get the *meaning* out of such a sequence. To get meaning is almost inevitably to set up a moral paradigm in which the Snopeses "represent" the greed principle in the universe—the effort to convert nature into land, land into money, and money into the matter which the depraved human spirit attempts to grasp. If Snopeses *are* the essence of that depravity, the attempt to judge them leads Ratliff—the novelistic agent for observing them as well as the dramatic actor who attempts to beat them—into spiritual descent and defeat. Thomas Greet, in a fine essay on the book, points out that as Ratliff more and more turns toward conventional judgment—as when he deplores the Snopes raree show exhibiting a peek at Ike and the cow—he turns from humor to sardonic wit.[2] It is precisely in that turn that his determination to best or beat Flem Snopes takes its rise.

If we hold to the moral paradigm and see the Snopeses as evil—some ruthless, predatory principle at the heart of human life viciously expressing itself through the capitalistic system—

we get at once a typological vision of the perennial fall of man coupled with a secular historical vision of the descent of man into the degeneration of time. To get so much is to get meaning out of Faulkner. But meaning, as I have said in another connection, is *mean;* it is an acquisitive act of the mind bent on extracting significance by a process of abstraction.[3] As such, it is a mental process as loaded with calculation and manipulation as the horse trade between Pat Stamper and Ab Snopes that initiates us into the world of *The Hamlet*. Even so, there is no way to avoid the quest for meaning in the world of William Faulkner, for Faulkner's work requires such a response. Readers are as helpless before that requirement as I would like to believe they are before Faulkner's humor. In the face of Faulkner's style and structure we *have* to interpret, and the interpretation of the Snopeses as illustrative of the greed principle in human society, though by no means the only interpretation advanced about them, is just as clearly a means of seeing them. Interpretation is, after all, hardly confined to the world of literary critics. Many of Faulkner's own characters—Quentin, Ike McCaslin, Mr. Compson, V. K. Ratliff, Gavin Stevens, to name a few—spend themselves in the attempt to see the meaning of events. And those who don't interpret—figures such as Benjy Compson or Cash Bundren—provoke interpretation in us as readers.

I am willing—even delighted—to acknowledge that the need for meaning is greater in Faulkner's world than the need for humor. Precisely because it is so great, the humor that is so irrepressibly present in Yoknapatawpha County is inordinately neglected. Meaning is, after all, antithetical to humor. Getting meaning involves the collaboration of the reason and the will—to resort to terms from the old psychology of the faculties of mind. The will joins the reason in an act of aggression upon the object of interpretation. Humor, on the other hand, is a response which suspends both will and reason. What is remarkable about Faulkner is his determination to keep these antithetical activities of experience in juxtaposition. In that respect he is a vastly different writer from the Mark Twain of *Huckleberry Finn*. In