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Jay Parini

Editor in Chief

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WILLIAM FAULKNER ~ MINA LOY

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THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
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WILLIAM FAULKNER

by Charles Hannon



William Faulkner's life and work were shaped by tension and contradiction. He valued privacy, but he yearned for public validation of his work as a writer. He prized authenticity, but he affected a number of personas, both personal and professional, in presenting himself to his friends and family, to the people of his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi, and to his readers. For a writer who worked hard to attain his level of success, he was surprisingly shy and awkward around publishers and literary critics. He liked to portray himself as a regional writer and even a small farmer, but his works sounded themes of national significance and universal meaning. He was a realist with firm roots in nineteenth-century romanticism and pastoralism, yet many of his works define American literary modernism and even anticipate the aesthetics of postmodernism.



William Faulkner, 1954. (Photograph by Carl Van Vechten. Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

GROWING UP

William Cuthbert Faulkner was born on 25 September 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi. He was the eldest son of Murry and Maud Butler Falkner, the grandson of John Wesley Thompson Falkner, and the great-grandson of William Clark Falkner. Faulkner, who added the "u" to his surname to reclaim the legacy of a name altered by his great-grandfather, was always conscious of himself as the fourth-generation son of a storied and, in many ways, attenuating family. His great-grandfather was a Civil War colonel and a successful writer and had been instrumental in founding what became the Gulf & Chicago railroad. His grandfather, a successful lawyer, politician, and banker in his own right, inherited the colonel's railroad just as he had inherited the moniker "Young Colonel," a permanent reference to his father's stature in the history of the state and county. Faulkner's father, Murry Falkner,

worked happily for this railroad until his father sold it, thus denying the son the opportunity to assume his father's presidency and condemning him to a succession of unsatisfying jobs as the manager of his father's business concerns, as a small business owner, and finally as an administrator at the University of Mississippi. Surveying this gradual decline in his family's status and influence in the county, Faulkner might have felt dispossessed of his birthright as the great-grandson of Colonel William Clark Falkner. But in equal measure he felt liberated to redefine his inheritance by identifying with the literary aspirations of his great-grandfather and assuming the role of bardic poet in relation to his own and his region's past.

Critics draw many comparisons between the generations of Faulkner's patrilineage and those of the influential families in the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County of his novels. His first Yoknapatawpha novel, *Sartoris* (1929), begins with a reference to the legendary Colonel John Sartoris, a slaveholding small farmer who, much like Faulkner's great-grandfather, fought in the Civil War and later became a politician and a builder of railroads. After introducing this patriarch as a formidable force in the county history and especially in the psychological lives of his descendants, *Sartoris* focuses on the story of John Sartoris's son, "old Bayard," and great-grandson, "young Bayard." Old Bayard is a successful but ineffectual and near-deaf banker whose accomplishments in life have always been overshadowed by those of his father. Young Bayard, the novel's protagonist, is a recently returned World War I aviator caught in a struggle to build a meaningful life in the aftermath of war, his family's diminished status, and the deaths of his wife and child. The Compson family of *The Sound and the*

Fury (1929), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and a number of short stories presents a similar case of attenuated family fortunes. The earliest Compsons were large landowners in the county; one, Quentin MacLachan Compson II, was elected governor of Mississippi. Like Faulkner's great-grandfather, Jason Lycurgus Compson II was a notable Civil War officer; his son, Jason Compson, appears in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* as a dissipated, albeit intellectual, alcoholic who is forced to sell off the family lands to maintain social appearances and support his children. One of these children, Quentin Compson, uses these proceeds to attend Harvard University for one year, after which he commits suicide. These parallels (and they could be extended to other families in Faulkner's fiction, such as the McCaslins and even the Snopeses) in no way suggest a direct reflection in the writer's work of the vicissitudes of his own family's fortunes. Rather, they signify a larger thematic connection in Faulkner's major work between various forms of disintegration, whether regional, familial, psychological, or other. As such, we do not find a complete handling of a single family in any single work; instead, Faulkner rewrites and develops them in new ways in the span of his Yoknapatawpha saga.

Connections between the various generations of Falkner women and the female characters in Faulkner's fiction are even more tendentious but nevertheless significant. While Faulkner had a very loving relationship with his mother, Maud Falkner, the mothers that appear in most of his fiction are cold and distant. Often they perform only a formal function. Caroline Bascomb Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* is primarily felt as an absence in the lives of the Compson children Benjy, Quentin, Caddy, and Jason. Addie Bundren of *As I Lay Dying* (1930) dies shortly after the action of the novel begins, although her presence in each character's life remains almost overpowering. The warmth that Faulkner felt toward his mother and especially toward a much-loved family servant, Caroline Barr (Mammy Callie), he seems to have poured into such characters as Dilsey Gibson (in *The Sound and the Fury*) and perhaps some minor characters such as Mrs. Armstid, who appears in several stories, most notably *The Hamlet* (1940), as long-suffering and devoted to her children. Faulkner wrote sympathetically about the sufferings of rural, impoverished women; in *Absalom, Absalom!*, for instance, he describes Sutpen's sister's labor over the family's dirty clothes as "brutish and stupidly out of all proportion to its reward: the very primary essence of labor." But for the most part he has been criticized for his one-dimensional treatment of women characters

such as Eula Varner in *The Hamlet* and Temple Drake in *Sanctuary* (1931) and for the callous use of women by his male characters, as when Anse Bundren uses the occasion of a trip to Jefferson for his wife's burial to select and marry a new Mrs. Bundren.

It is clear that Murry and Maud Falkner took upon themselves different responsibilities with regard to the raising of their children. As the Faulkner biographer Joseph Blotner (1991) makes clear, while Murry valued adventure and the outdoors, Maud valued learning and formal education. It was therefore difficult for her to see her eldest son become an indifferent student. By the time he reached the seventh grade Faulkner had decided that he could do a better job than the school system could of educating himself in the topics that interested him. From that point on, if he abandoned formal schooling altogether (he never graduated from high school), he still used it as a resource toward personal improvement. Beginning in 1919, this included taking occasional courses in English and languages at the University of Mississippi, through a special program that opened up university courses to World War I veterans. Previously, in 1914, he had begun a friendship with Philip Avery Stone, a law student at the University of Mississippi who had just returned from Yale University, where he had developed a passion for literature. Faulkner shared some of his poetry with Stone, who became an instant believer in the writer's talent. Although Faulkner already was an avid reader, Stone helped him develop a systematic approach to both reading and learning from the rising generation of modern poets and novelists. Moreover, Stone encouraged Faulkner to think of himself as part of this generation. With Stone's financial assistance, Faulkner's first book of verse, *The Marble Faun*, was published by the Four Seas Company in December 1924.

Faulkner wrote poetry throughout the 1910s and 1920s, binding much of his verse by hand and presenting it to women he was courting, such as his childhood sweetheart Estelle Oldham, whom he would marry in 1929 after her divorce from her first husband. Only two volumes were published in his lifetime, *The Marble Faun* (1924) and *A Green Bough* (1933). For the most part, Faulkner's verse is derivative and unoriginal, but it is useful to see how he used poetry to work out internal conflicts as he developed his sense of himself as a writer. As a young man Faulkner had to overcome his culture's general disdain toward aesthetes; literature and art were considered appropriate avocations for a southern gentleman but not an acceptable way of making

a living. As the biographer David Minter (1980) observes, "That his early poetry bespeaks deep ambivalence toward the role of the observer and the fate it implies—that the persona of *The Marble Faun*, for example, describes itself as 'mute and impotent'—suggests something of the suspicion, division, fear, and pain of Faulkner's earliest years as a writer." It is possible to observe in his verse some affinities with other modern poets, especially the imagists, as in the last line of this description in *The Marble Faun* of nymphs approaching a body of water:

And they kneel languorously there
To comb and braid their short blown hair
Before they slip into the pool—
Warm gold in silver liquid cool.

More than anything, he used poetry to familiarize himself with literary language. While this often produced overly imitative work, we can also see hints in his early poetry of the powerful novelistic images in later work. For instance, Faulkner uses the word "flecks" in *The Marble Faun* to describe sunlight passing through the leaves of the trees:

Evening turns and sunlight falls
In flecks between the leafed walls
Like golden butterflies whose wings
Slowly pulse and beat.

In the first few lines of *Absalom, Absalom!*, he again draws a poetic image with the word, describing the stale office where Quentin Compson meets Rosa Coldfield "which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them." Although Faulkner only came into his own as a writer of novels, he never discarded his early poetic persona, and he drew upon lessons learned as a poet (sometimes even quoting his own early poetry) throughout his career.

A number of events coinciding with this early period in Faulkner's career had a deep impact upon his life and, both directly and indirectly, his writing. His childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham, married a successful lawyer, Cornell Franklin, in 1918 and moved to Hawaii. In the same year, Faulkner tried to enlist in the U.S. Army but was rejected, causing him to leave Oxford to visit Stone in New Haven, where the latter had returned to finish a second law degree. Still attracted to the military and eager to serve in World War I, Faulkner became a cadet in the Royal Air Force and trained for some months

in Toronto, Canada. When he was discharged at the end of the year without seeing any action, he returned to Oxford to tell exaggerated tales of his wartime experiences. Some in his acquaintance received the impression that he had been shot down over France and now had a metal plate in his head. It is difficult to be certain what led Faulkner to such embellishment; in all likelihood it was a combination of a desire to deflect attention from the emotional wounds from which he still suffered on account of Estelle's marriage, to develop a new persona for himself as he embarked upon a new phase in his life, and to share in the reception accorded his younger brother Jack (who really was wounded in the war) and other returning veterans. Whatever the reason, it was an invention that he would come to regret as he established himself as a successful writer in his first published novel, which, ironically, was about the difficulties faced by returning World War I veterans.

Soldiers' Pay (1926) begins with the self-indulgent lamentations of Julian Lowe, a flight cadet whose view of the world is jaundiced because "they had stopped the war on him" before he had had the chance to complete his training and achieve wartime glory. Lowe emerges from this novel as an ineffectual lover and soldier, especially in comparison with Donald Mahon, a lieutenant grievously injured in the war, who attracts both the attention and sympathy of the object of Lowe's romantic affection, Margaret Powers. In this triangulation of character and emotion we can see many of Faulkner's frustrations regarding his own relations with Estelle and his lack of a "legitimate" wartime experience. Lowe's frustrations resemble not only Faulkner's own in being unable to contribute substantially to the war effort but also his dejection at Estelle's marriage to the older and more successful Cornell Franklin. The novel is marked as a novice effort by the shallowness of some of its characters—especially its clichéd depiction of blacks—and by the self-consciousness of much of its dialogue. However, in its themes of postwar sterility and ennui, it holds a respectable position among the first works of modern American writers.

BECOMING A WRITER

Faulkner apprenticed as an artist rather than as a poet, novelist, or other genre writer. He was a credible line drawer, publishing illustrations in the University of Mississippi yearbook *Ole Miss* as early as 1916. He began writing poetry at a very early age, sharing his verses with Estelle Oldham when they were both still

children, and carefully composing and binding by hand a poem sequence called *Helen: A Courtship* in 1926 for Helen Baird, a beach-house neighbor of Phil Stone's brother, with whom Faulkner spent the summer of 1925 in Pascagoula, Mississippi. He later belittled his years as a poet as an effort in "furthering various philanderings in which I was engaged," but such statements were more the result of the failure of these "philanderings" than of any serious disavowal of his early conception of himself as a poet. In 1920 he handed his friend (and later, literary agent) Ben Wasson a play, *The Marionettes*, which he had written for an Ole Miss drama group with which he was involved. Although not performed by the group, it demonstrated Faulkner's pleasure in experimenting with a variety of literary genres. At the same time, he was writing literary reviews and essays for the Ole Miss newspaper as well as for other local and state publications and sending his work out to national magazines. His apprenticeship as a novelist only began when he lived among other writers in New Orleans and began to think of himself as part of the rising generation of modern novelists. Crucial in this regard was his meeting and befriending of Sherwood Anderson, author of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Anderson recommended *Soldiers' Pay*, written primarily in New Orleans, to his own publishers, Boni & Liveright, who agreed to publish both it and Faulkner's second novel, *Mosquitoes* (1927). Faulkner spent approximately six months traveling in Europe in 1925, solidifying his identification as a modernist by visiting cities inhabited by the expatriate writers of the era, returning to New Orleans shortly afterward. Over the next two years he worked on *Mosquitoes* and, most important, his first novel about the families and history of his imaginary world of Yoknapatawpha County.

Faulkner titled his first Yoknapatawpha novel *Flags in the Dust*; it was published, only after much editing by Ben Wasson, as *Sartoris* in 1929. His experience with this novel can be seen as a pivotal moment in his career. Certainly it marked an end to his apprenticeship period and led to the writing of his first great work, *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner completed *Flags in the Dust* in September 1927, convinced that it was a masterpiece. He felt he had discovered the mythological value of what he later would call his "own postage stamp of native soil," writing not only about the postwar experience of Bayard Sartoris but also about the vicissitudes of the Sartoris dynasty and the corresponding history of Yoknapatawpha County. To his great surprise, Boni & Liveright disagreed with Faulkner's estimation of the novel, rejecting it and

advising him not to seek its publication elsewhere. Despite this advice, Faulkner placed the novel with Harcourt, Brace, on the condition that Faulkner allow it to be edited significantly. Ben Wasson performed this editing, and *Sartoris* was finally published in 1929. The rejection by Boni & Liveright of work he had thought his very best came as a shock to Faulkner; in response, he turned all of his attention to *The Sound and the Fury*, the novel that established him as one of the great moderns.

"Modernism" is essentially a literary and aesthetic movement that sought new forms of artistic expression and that differentiated itself from prior (primarily Victorian) literary practices. Faulkner's writing in *The Sound and the Fury* takes part in this differentiation in its use of stream-of-consciousness narrative, its experimental four-part form, and its disregarding of conventional grammar and syntax. As a modernist, however, Faulkner does not exaggerate the possibilities offered by sweeping away traditional literary forms. This may be a result of his apprenticeship as a poet in the mold of such formally traditional writers as A. E. Housman, whom he cited as an early influence. But it is also a consequence of the parallel tensions in Faulkner's texts between experimental and traditional literary forms, and between Victorian and modern cultural attitudes and mores. As a result of these tensions, one often finds in Faulkner's texts both a defense and a critique of literary and social traditions, juxtaposed with similarly conflicting representations of modernist and modern alternatives to these traditions.

The Sound and the Fury essentially tells one story from four different perspectives: Benjy Compson's, Quentin Compson's, Jason Compson's, and that of a traditional third-person, omniscient narrator. It is predicated upon an image of the three brothers' sister, Caddy Compson, climbing a pear tree to see into the house where the wake of the children's recently deceased grandmother, "Damuddy," is taking place. Caddy's drawers are muddied from playing in the creek, and as a symbol of despoilment, the mud represents some form of loss on the part of each brother that is associated with the sister. Benjy Compson's section of the novel is disconnected: often referred to as one of Faulkner's "idiot" characters, his consciousness drifts through time based upon visual and aural associations and sensory perceptions. The reader of Benjy's section is forced to work his narrative like a puzzle, often deferring the moment of comprehension through more pieces of the puzzle. What emerges is Benjy's deep emotional attachment to his sister, Caddy—in many ways a substitution for the affection missing from his

relationship with his mother, who is ashamed of his mental retardation—and a sense of loss related to Caddy's removal from the family. From Quentin Compson's section we learn of Caddy's sexual promiscuity and the consequent necessity, due to her pregnancy, to marry the first man who proposes to her, Herbert Head. When Quentin learns that all feelings are temporary—even the feeling of loss he suffers in relation to Caddy—he commits suicide. In a far more acerbic section of the novel, Jason Compson sees in his sister's "soiling" the loss of any opportunity he might have had to advance in wealth and status. The children's father has sold family lands in order to pay for Caddy's impromptu wedding and for Quentin's first year at Harvard University, leaving no inheritance to help Jason get ahead. The final section, told in the more conventional narrative voice and focused on the Compson family's servant Dilsey, ties the previous three sections together by answering many of the questions raised by them. Thus the conventional literary form of this final section brings order to the chaos of the fractured modernist narratives that preceded it, just as Dilsey's reliance upon religious tradition brings order, for her, to the chaotic, progressive impulses that are affecting the younger generations of her own family.

The Sound and the Fury employs many of the tools of literary modernism to tell a universal tale of family strife and turmoil. A similar accomplishment occurs in *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that Faulkner called his "tour de force." In this novel, Addie Bundren spends her last hours listening to her son Cash carpenter her casket outside her window. After her death, the family embarks upon a voyage of biblical proportions with the aim of burying Addie in the town of Jefferson, where her "people" are. The family initially is impeded by the flooded Yoknapatawpha River, which has washed out two different bridges that they hope to cross. In attempting to ford the flooded waters they lose their team of mules, and Cash, the eldest, breaks a leg. This misadventure forces the family to turn back and cross the river at another town and then continue on to Jefferson from there. Along the way, the family falls deeper and deeper into tragedy, with Darl setting fire to the barn of a farmer who lodges them one night; Dewey Dell, the daughter, seeking an abortion from local pharmacists and receiving instead only scorn in one case and sexual abuse in another; and Anse, the family patriarch, worsening the condition of Cash's leg by setting it in concrete. All the while, Addie's body decomposes in the hot Mississippi climate, attracting vultures and the disapproving glares of the local population. The novel ends ironically, with the

family made "whole" again as Anse locates a new wife. Its concluding line, "Meet Mrs. Bundren," represents Anse's risible attempt to bring a sense of unity and cohesion to this hopelessly dysfunctional group.

As *I Lay Dying* unfolds through a series of fifty-nine chapters, each the spoken monologue of the novel's fifteen different narrators. Various members of this southern community contribute to the story of Addie's life and death, but the notion of "community" is undercut by the fact that they speak their stories separately rather than communally, in dialogue. While the novel itself is an instance of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia*, the coming together of a variety of social and economic voices, the form of the novel suggests that this sort of experiential communion never occurs in the real lives of its characters. Moreover, the narrative itself is obstructed, interrupted, diverted, and turned around as often as the family in its attempt to reach Jefferson and bury its matriarch. Faulkner manages to match content and form in an experimental manner that stretches the novel to its limits in terms of language, style, and the reader's traditional need for coherence and closure. As with *The Sound and the Fury*, it becomes impossible to separate the story itself from the way it is told; the novel becomes a commentary on both traditional and modernist modes of literary production, within a context that contrasts ensconced social traditions with "progressive" variations upon those traditions.

Faulkner's modernist literary practices place him with others of his generation such as Sherwood Anderson, James Joyce, and the poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. For Faulkner, however, the practice of literary modernism always takes place within the context of "modernity," the phenomenon of social progressivism from the turn of the century up to World War II. Most often, modernity is represented in Faulkner's work by the introduction of new, inferior, and usually vulgar modes of thought and behavior, in place of well-established tradition. Critics often refer to Snopesism in this context; members of the Snopes family rise to positions of influence in the village of Frenchman's Bend in the three Snopes novels, *The Hamlet*, *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959). But this negative portrayal of modernity appears in much of Faulkner's fiction, as in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), when Faulkner compares the "old big decaying wooden houses of Jefferson's long-ago foundation set . . . deep in shaggy untended lawns of old trees and rootbound scented and flowering shrubs whose very names most people under fifty no longer knew," to the "neat small new one-storey houses designed in Florida and California set

with matching garages in their neat plots of clipped grass and tedious flowerbeds, three and four of them now, a subdivision now in what twenty-five years ago had been considered a little small for one decent front lawn.” At such moments in Faulkner’s works the present rarely compares favorably with the past. And yet the past is seldom presented in unmitigatedly positive terms. The symbols of its glory invariably are empty or decaying, marked by some secret that undoes the myths and legends of southern grandeur. Thus the critique of the modern era that we find in Faulkner’s texts is often part of the writer’s ironic commentary upon the past. It is this doubly ironic stance toward both the present and the historical that defines, in part, his identity as a modernist writer.

Modernity is not categorically condemned in Faulkner, however. The progressive politics of the modern period are often presented as an opportunity for liberation from societal constraints, especially for the marginalized or disenfranchised such as women, blacks, or other racial and ethnic minorities. Caspey, a black character in *Flags in the Dust*, expresses this sense of opportunity when he asserts, upon his return from World War I, that “War showed de white folks dey cant git along widout de colored man . . . now de colored race gwine reap de benefits of de war, and dat soon.” Progressivism creates nodes of tension in Faulkner’s texts between his disfranchised characters’ demands for freedom and the forces of society that suppress such demands. This is the case with Loosh, a character in *The Unvanquished* (1938), who anticipates new forms of social freedom when he celebrates the fall of Vicksburg to Union troops but who is derided at almost the same moment in Bayard Sartoris’s use of clichéd descriptions, as the novel’s narrator, of Loosh’s “cannonball” head and “his eyes a little red at the inner corners as negroes’ eyes get when they have been drinking.” Bayard’s racial insults against Loosh intensify when he suspects Loosh’s disloyalty to the Sartoris family; they are an indication of his social class’s anxiety over the impending social, political, and economic changes that will emancipate the slaves and complicate efforts of empowered whites to maintain their positions of dominance. For both Caspey and Loosh, their sense of liberation parallels the historical reality of civil rights opportunities in the aftermath of the American Civil War and World War I, respectively. In other texts, such as *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939; originally published as *The Wild Palms*), Faulkner represents the opportunities inherent in a progressive, modern America for a liberated woman such as

Charlotte Rittenmeyer, but again, within a context of conservative social impulses that tend to foreclose upon such opportunities in unexpected and often tragic ways. Each of these texts illustrates how Faulkner’s narrative forms register the shattering of coherent, progressive identities in the centripetal relation between tradition and individual, between modernity and history.

In his Yoknapatawpha novels, Faulkner’s critical stance is much like that of Chick Mallison, the young boy in *Intruder in the Dust* who uncovers the truth about a fratricide within a rural white clan that, but for his intervention, would have triggered a cycle of retributive violence against Lucas Beauchamp, the black man originally accused in the murder. “It seemed to him now,” Faulkner writes of Chick, “that he was responsible for having brought into the light and glare of day something shocking and shameful out of the whole white foundation of the county which he himself must partake of too since he too was bred of it.” Faulkner’s best novels and stories are about this tension created when a community’s shared fantasies about itself are exposed to public scrutiny. In *Intruder in the Dust*, the white inhabitants of Jefferson have grown comfortable in their assumptions about segregation. They believe they have created a society in which blacks, and whites are separated along political, economic, and social lines. When the black population withdraws from the town in the wake of Lucas’s arrest for the murder of Vinson Gowrie, however, Jefferson’s whites begin to feel their dependence upon their black counterparts. Indeed, as the novel develops we see that the town’s whites rely upon their ability to suppress blacks—figured most violently in the threat of lynching that forms the subtext of the novel—in order to define themselves as whites and especially as white southerners. Like Chick Mallison’s own efforts to uncover the truth, Faulkner’s novels bring such cultural tensions into public view, as well as the strategies by which his characters seek to obscure or elide them. In *The Town*, Eula Varner tells Gavin Stevens, “It doesn’t even matter whether the facts are true or not, as long as they match other facts without leaving a rough seam.” One important aspect of Faulkner’s modernism is his exploration of individual and group identities—of forms of belonging to family, society, and culture—and of the cultural blind spots that attach to these forms of belonging, the “rough seams” that stitch together his characters’ experiences as individuals and as members of larger communities.

Faulkner’s examination of race within the social context is most powerfully developed in *Light in August* (1932).

Joe Christmas is orphaned as a young boy; as he grows up other children in the orphanage label him “black,” and the orphanage’s dietician joins them when Christmas commits a minor infraction against her. As a result, the matron of the orphanage places Christmas with undesirable parents, primarily because they have not yet heard the rumors about his racial heritage. With this background, Christmas grows up with fundamental uncertainties about his identity. While this uncertainty is part of the racial legacy of the South—many southerners today would be surprised to learn that according to the rules that determined race in the early twentieth century, they would be considered “black”—for Christmas it develops into a kind of psychosis related to identity, behavior, and social position. He often doesn’t know how to act, because in his highly racialized culture this question is complicated by the question of how whites are expected to act in relation to other whites and to blacks, how whites expect blacks to act in certain social and political situations, and how blacks understand and act upon these expectations on the part of whites. This uncertainty leads Christmas to revert to racial stereotypes in governing his relations with others; in consequence, they do the same. Christmas eventually murders the white woman Joanna Burden, for which crime he is hunted down, murdered, publicly mutilated, and lynched. But the novel is more than a portrayal of scandalous race relations in the early twentieth century. Because Christmas never knows for certain whether he is black, the novel becomes an examination of the irrational degree to which considerations of race determine almost all aspects of life in this region of the South.

Light in August also tells the story of one of Faulkner’s most memorable female characters, Lena Grove, an Alabama girl raised by an uncaring uncle after her parents die when she is only twelve years old. This is an example of another aspect of Faulkner’s modernist experimentation: his use of the “contrapuntal” form in storytelling. That is, in several of his novels Faulkner pairs two or more seemingly unrelated stories in order to explore thematic and symbolic connections that tie their characters’ lives together on a metaphysical level. In this way he is able to develop universal themes of human existence indirectly, as a result of the homologies that develop between the two narratives. Lena’s uncle raises her in an environment marked by poverty and emotional distance. She becomes pregnant by a man named Lucas Burch, who promptly abandons her. The novel follows her journey, on foot, from Alabama to Mississippi, where she meets Byron

Bunch, who knows Burch as Joe Brown, a bootlegger who has formed a kind of partnership with Christmas. Bunch falls in love with Lena and for much of the novel tries to prevent her from learning that Brown is a moral bankrupt who has no intention of marrying her. In placing these two stories side by side, Faulkner develops themes of love and abandonment, naïveté and betrayal, sacrifice and selfishness, more fully than he could have done with one or the other story alone. Another example of the contrapuntal form is *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*. Here Faulkner pairs “The Wild Palms,” a novella about a tragic romance between Harry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer that ends with Rittenmeyer’s death after a botched abortion procedure performed by Wilbourne, with “Old Man,” a novella about an unnamed Mississippi convict who rescues a pregnant woman from the 1927 Mississippi River flood. This use of the contrapuntal form allows Faulkner to develop themes of love and compassion, loyalty and commitment, in ways not possible through conventional novelistic methods. The form also allows Faulkner to extend his examination of the tension between progressive conceptions of individual freedom and the social constraints that limit this freedom. The experiences of Lena, Charlotte, and the unnamed woman of “Old Man” suggest the progressive idea that individual autonomy for women is conditioned upon their control over their own reproductive rights, yet the only narrative order that is brought to the chaos of these romances comes in the form of tradition: of Byron Bunch’s respectful treatment of Lena, of the legal system’s punishment of Wilbourne for the death of Rittenmeyer, and of the unnamed convict’s “gentlemanly” regard for the pregnant woman, the “universal mother” of “Old Man.”

Related to Faulkner’s use of the contrapuntal are his several efforts to create novels out of revised versions of previously published short stories. The first of these was *The Unvanquished*. Faulkner had published many of the stories that comprise this novel in the early 1930s, in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Scribner’s*. In late 1936 he proposed to his publisher that he revise the series into an integrated work. In the process, Faulkner made several significant revisions to the existing stories and wrote a new piece, “An Odor of Verbena,” to unify the various themes of the individual pieces. He pursued a similar strategy with his thirteenth novel, *Go Down, Moses* (1942), most of which had been published earlier as individual short stories. By tying them together as a novel, Faulkner developed a number of themes important to his overall oeuvre: relations between the races, parallels

between the passing of time and the vanishing wilderness, the significance of genealogy. Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin emerges as the ancestral “spine” that holds together (however tenuously) both this novel and the families that cohabit the relatively small rural county it portrays. In this case, Faulkner’s method of piecing together seemingly unrelated stories allows him to return to the theme of patriarchal lineage as both a positive and a debilitating force. For his readers and critics, this narrative method, like the yoking together of traditional and modernist forms and the use of the contrapuntal, demands a reconsideration of the definition of the novel itself—another reason Faulkner remains one of the most accomplished at the art in America.

HISTORY, MEMORY, AND STORYTELLING

Many of Faulkner’s best novels can be thought of as reflections upon the process of storytelling itself. His characters define themselves, in all their conflicts and internal divisions, through the stories they tell about themselves, their families, and their communities. Often this process is accompanied by reflections upon the social, economic, political, and psychological turmoil caused by war—in particular, the American Civil War and World War I. Two novels about the earliest of these conflicts, *The Unvanquished* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, have in common a narrative perspective that looks back upon history from some point in the more modern future. The “moment of narration,” the time frame from which stories about the past are told, is unknown in the stories that comprise *The Unvanquished*. An adult Bayard Sartoris—perhaps near the age at which we meet him as the “Old Colonel” in *Sartoris*—relates events that occurred in his family and county around the time of Civil War and Reconstruction. He begins with a scene in which he and Ringo, one of his family’s slaves, are playing war games around a model of Vicksburg, Mississippi, which they have constructed of wood and mud. Ringo’s uncle Loosh destroys the model, representing the Union’s recent capture of the real Vicksburg from Confederate forces. The gesture marks Loosh’s understanding that the new postwar order will confer upon him, and other freed slaves, political, economic, and social rights previously denied them. The prominence of the scene in *The Unvanquished* suggests Bayard’s recognition years later, at the moment of narration, of its symbolic meaning as a representation of his own family’s and economic class’s diminished power and status. The stories in *The Unvanquished* follow Bayard from youth into early adulthood. They constitute

Bayard’s reminiscence of pivotal events in his and his family’s history, covering the period of his father’s Civil War exploits and his efforts to rebuild his small farm in the aftermath of war; his violent suppression of black voting rights under Mississippi’s Reconstruction government; and his murder, in the novel’s final story “An Odor of Verbena,” at the hand of a business competitor. Bayard refuses to avenge his father’s murder because, in the words of one of his father’s partisans, “maybe there has been enough killing in your family.” The story closes with an infantilized portrait of Bayard kneeling at his Aunt Jenny’s feet; as a “prequel” to the previously published *Sartoris*, Faulkner seems to tie Bayard’s ineffectual life in that novel to this earlier separation, in “An Odor of Verbena,” from the codes that governed his own father’s character and life.

The narrative strategy developed in *The Unvanquished* allows Faulkner’s readers to review events of the distant past in juxtaposition with the more contemporary events of the previously published *Sartoris*. In *Sartoris*, Young Bayard (grandson of the Bayard of *The Unvanquished*), recently returned from World War I, struggles to reestablish relations with his family and community and to control his emotions in the aftermath of the death of his wife and child. In this sense he can be compared to his grandfather (the Bayard of *The Unvanquished*) as the latter had to work through the emotional and economic turmoil of Civil War and Reconstruction. Both men ultimately disavow their inheritances from the old order: the one refusing to avenge his father’s death, the other committing suicide and thus cutting off the family line altogether. The strategy allows a number of other themes important to Faulkner’s later work to develop as well, most notably in the effects of war on relations between different races and social classes. Loosh’s act of rebellion in the opening pages of *The Unvanquished* is of a piece with Caspey’s initial refusal, in *Sartoris*, to play the part of a loyal slave when he returns from service in World War I. For each of these men, the postwar atmosphere serves as an opportunity to compel the nation to live up to the ideals of equality before the law celebrated in its founding documents. Similarly *Sartoris* includes the first stories of the poor-white Snopeses’ economic and social advancement in the postwar years. In this novel, Flem Snopes is already vice president of the Sartoris bank and manager of Jefferson’s city and water plant; Byron Snopes, his half-mad kinsman, is a bookkeeper in the Bank of Jefferson. Faulkner’s interest in the social, economic, and even political opportunities for disfranchised populations

in the postwar environment is evident in these early novels, and it continued throughout his later works.

Absalom, Absalom! is similarly premised upon the narration of events of the past from a more modern position. Quentin Compson, a major character in the earlier *The Sound and the Fury*, is both audience and author of the story of Thomas Sutpen. Called to his Aunt Rosa Coldfield's house in the summer prior to first attending Harvard College, he listens to her version of Sutpen's story only to have it filled out and modified by his father, who in turn had parts of the story from his father. In the end Quentin fabricates portions of the story himself in collaboration with his Canadian roommate at Harvard, Shreve McCannon. The story involves Sutpen's dirt-poor origins in Tidewater Virginia and his later removal to the West Indies, where he works as an overseer on a plantation. Instrumental in defending the planter and his family from a slave rebellion, he marries the planter's daughter and has a son by her. When he learns that she is of mixed race, Sutpen abandons her, moves into the Yoknapatawpha region of Mississippi, and begins again to build his dream of himself as a landed aristocrat. He marries Ellen Coldfield, Rosa's sister, and has a son and daughter by her. The son, Henry, befriends Charles Bon, Sutpen's son by his first marriage, while the two are at school together at the University of Mississippi. Henry brings Charles home with him during Christmas break, and Bon forms an engagement with Henry's sister Judith, possibly as a way of avenging Sutpen's abandonment of his mother and himself. Faulkner skillfully develops this internecine story of racial antagonism, familial betrayal, and incestuous desire as an allegory of slaveholding in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its beginnings in the West Indies and its ruthless pursuit of wealth. As with the history of slavery in America, Sutpen's story comes to a head with the Civil War: Sutpen, Henry, and Bon fight for the Confederacy, but on returning to Sutpen's plantation, Henry learns of Charles's identity as his and Judith's half-brother and slays him at the gate of their father's house. Sutpen remains determined beyond rationality to accomplish his original design, leading to the ruination of his family and to his own death at the hands of the poor-white squatter Wash Jones, whose own daughter Sutpen abandons when she gives birth to a daughter, rather than a son, by him.

Beyond its dramatic twists and turns, the story of Thomas Sutpen resonates with the themes of Faulkner's most powerful fiction. Sutpen is driven to moral and ethical collapse by his pursuit of a design that is, at its

core, inherent in the history of the South and of the United States. The design is predicated upon the debasement of the men and women he enslaves, the women with whom he seeks to produce an heir, and his own children, both those he recognizes and those he disavows. Yet for the most part, his actions are not only tolerated but accepted by the people of Jefferson: the local men join him on his plantation, Sutpen's Hundred, for hunting parties and for the battles royal in which he engages with his slaves; a prominent man of Jefferson, Goodhue Coldfield, accepts Sutpen as a son-in-law; and dozens of locals elect him to be their commanding officer during the war years. It is only in retrospect that Sutpen becomes the "demon" described by Rosa Coldfield and others, after the South's devastating loss in the war has led to a collective mourning of the past and a disavowal of those elements of that past, including Sutpen, who can be charged with making its principle elements—slavery, the exploitation of land, the ruthless desire for wealth and power among southern oligarchs—too visible. The narrative apparatus of the novel collapses time in a way that allows readers to see the past as it is constructed by the principle inheritors of that past—Quentin, Rosa, Shreve, and even the readers themselves. These characters are developed through their relation to the past; their efforts to understand themselves and their role in modern society are thus conditioned by what they are willing to accept, in the narratives they develop, about the people and events that preceded them. For the most part the Civil War figures in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels as the primal moment in this process of historical and psychological assessment and examination.

World War I appears in Faulkner's work in much the way that it does in the modern poetry of Eliot and Pound: as a symbol of cultural waste and personal desolation. In *Soldiers' Pay*, Donald Mahon, a lieutenant returning from the war, is an exhausted shell of a man. His face is scarred horribly, and he is rapidly going blind. He is an Odysseus returning home, but his Penelope, Cecily Saunders, abandons him upon seeing the extent of his injuries. With this premise, and like much modernist literature with a World War I context, the novel becomes a discussion of the dissolution of "epic" values and of the futility, in the modern world, of seeking wholeness in the traditions of the past.

Although a different kind of novel entirely, *Mosquitoes* can also be classified as a post-World War I "wasteland" novel, as it consists largely of a discussion of the place of art, love, and desire in postwar society. For the artists

who inhabit this novel, as for modern poets such as Eliot and Pound, the war brought about the destruction of the literary and artistic foundations of Western culture; literature and art thus represented the only viable means of rebuilding, of making sense of senseless destruction. In the tradition of the roman à clef, Faulkner places recognizable New Orleans personalities on board a yacht in Lake Pontchartrain, where they work out their sexual, psychological, and artistic anxieties and evince to each other the problems that result when the artist immerses himself or herself in artistic creation at the expense of developing authentic human relationships.

World War II figures less thematically in Faulkner's fiction than either of the other two major conflicts, but it did have a significant impact upon Faulkner's conception of himself as a writer and as a commentator upon national events and concerns. Critics often connect *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion* as Faulkner's "Snopes Trilogy" because these works chronicle Flem Snopes's full career: his rise from poverty in the village of Frenchman's Bend, his elevation to a surprising level of prosperity in the city of Jefferson, and then his eventual demise at the hand of his brother, Mink. But it is more appropriate in this context to separate the earliest of these works from the later two, which were both written after the war and contain some of Faulkner's most self-referential writing. In these later novels the central character is Gavin Stevens, who also appears in *Intruder in the Dust* and in a number of other stories, but who comes in *The Town* and *The Mansion* to represent Faulkner's ruminations about himself and his position vis-à-vis his imagined community of Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha. Thus Stevens's ironic attitude toward the rise of the Snopeses reflects Faulkner's own long-standing skepticism about the more vulgar aspects of modern society. Stevens's ineffectualness in combating Snopesism also suggests Faulkner's doubts, late in his career, about his own ability to continue writing with the critical and creative force of his earlier works. Stevens's romantic attachments in these novels also reflect his experiences with, and in some cases his fantasies about, the women in his life: Eula Varner Snopes's "verdant" sexuality makes her the long-standing Ideal Woman of Faulkner's imagination; her daughter Linda's youthful energy signifies the girl-woman Faulkner always sought in affairs with Helen Baird, Meta Carpenter, and others; and Stevens's marriage to Melissandre Harris, his childhood sweetheart now widowed with two children, evokes the pattern, if not the substance, of Faulkner's life with Estelle. It is inaccurate to think of this trilogy

as Faulkner's "swan song," since *The Reivers* (1962) was his final novel, and in many ways, *A Fable* (1954) holds the position of Faulkner's ultimate monumental effort. But the stories spread throughout the trilogy had a gestation period of many decades, and it is fair to say that they represent a post-World War II culmination of his Yoknapatawpha chronicle.

"POTBOILERS," HOLLYWOOD, AND THE NATIONAL PULPIT

Although the economics of being a writer in America are seldom discussed, Faulkner's life and work cannot be understood without taking them into consideration. Faulkner's writing did not make him comfortable financially until relatively late in his career. As a result, he worked a series of temporary, part-time, and only occasionally full-time jobs (as clerk, housepainter, postmaster) in order to support himself. As a young adult and aspiring writer, his inability to dedicate himself to traditional full-time employment eroded his reputation among both acquaintances and family; his father considered him a failure. In part, however, Faulkner's continuing poverty was due to bad timing: his first great critical success, *The Sound and the Fury*, was published just before the stock market crash of October 1929. In the economic climate of the Great Depression, writers had few opportunities to make a comfortable living.

One option available to writers was commercial magazines; periodicals such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Scribner's* remained successful through the Depression and paid top dollar for good fiction. Faulkner had written for newspapers and magazines as early as 1919, when he published poetry and reviews in *The Mississippian* and the *Oxford Eagle*. After making literary connections in New Orleans in 1924, he published work in the *Double Dealer*, a literary magazine, and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. After he determined to make his living as a fiction writer, he began systematically to write stories for magazine publication, hoping that this source of income would support him in writing more serious work. He kept meticulous records of his submissions and subsequent acceptances or rejections; for a long time, the latter far outnumbered the former. But magazine fiction was an occasional source of revenue for him and provided an opportunity to sketch out ideas and characters that he would later use in his novels.

A second avenue open to writers during the Depression was the Hollywood film industry. Studios competed with each other to sign the best-known writers from both America and Europe. Faulkner's first contract was with MGM,

for five hundred dollars per week for six weeks, beginning in May 1932. He knew very little about screenwriting and the studio received little for its investment, but Faulkner made friends with some key people in California, among them the director Howard Hawks, and so was offered subsequent contracts over a span of several years, at times making over one thousand dollars per week. For the most part Faulkner worked on existing screenplays, and an industry crediting procedure that limited to only one or two the number of writers formally acknowledged for their work on any given film kept Faulkner's name off the credits for many of the films on which he worked. A few of his original stories were taken up, however. Howard Hawks made *Today We Live* (1933) out of Faulkner's story "Turn About," and in 1938 Faulkner sold the screen rights to *The Unvanquished* to MGM for twenty-five thousand dollars. Ten years later he sold the rights to *Intruder in the Dust* for twice that amount, inaugurating a much-longed-for period of economic stability.

While his Hollywood work paid Faulkner's bills, helped him to refurbish Rowan Oak (a large historic house he purchased in Oxford), and even allowed him to purchase a farm in northern Mississippi, it took its toll. His plan to work a few months in California each year and then write serious fiction in Oxford seldom worked out as he had hoped. Also, the unfamiliar and relatively lax social environment of southern California exacerbated his long-standing problem with alcohol. In addition, his long separations from his wife, Estelle, led him to seek the companionship of other women. Writing for the Hollywood film industry thus was in many ways an extension of his writing of popular magazine fiction. It was a "necessary evil" that provided an income that supported what he considered his more serious writing, but it also distracted him from that more serious work.

If Faulkner's precarious economic situation throughout most of his career resulted in part from instability in the American economy, it allowed him to write sympathetically about characters who were powerless before insurmountable economic obstacles, whether these took the form of powerful landowners or one-sided economic systems such as credit capitalism, sharecropping, and tenant farming. In "Barn Burning" (1939), Abner Snopes is emblematic of the disempowered southern white sharecropper; lacking alternative outlets to express his economic frustrations, he resorts to burning the property of the post-Civil War aristocracy whose very prosperity he takes as a personal insult. In *The Hamlet*, one of Abner's descendents, Mink Snopes, resorts to murdering

Jack Houston over a simple matter of a trespassing cow. Mink's poverty has become pathological, controlling his life beyond all common sense. Even toward the end of his career, Faulkner continued his interest in the resentments of the economically deprived. In *The Mansion*, Mink, convinced that his now-powerful kinsman Flem Snopes could have helped him earn an early release from prison, murders him. Faulkner's greatest novels all represent this dialectic of yearning and revenge in some way: even Thomas Sutpen is motivated by the desire to rise up against the memory of a class insult, while his own end comes at the hand of the insulted Wash Jones. Certainly Faulkner's own economic troubles never equaled those of the sharecroppers of his native Mississippi, but labor unrest was a tangible issue in the 1930s in both the southern agricultural regions and the studio system of Hollywood, California; combined with his own financial straits, these contexts sensitized Faulkner, and his writings, to the importance of economic issues in the development of individual character—whether real or fictional.

With the sale of screen rights for *Intruder in the Dust*, and especially with the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949, Faulkner achieved a degree of financial security previously unknown to him. Ironically, this period of increased fame for his literary achievements coincided with a decrease in his ability to produce new work. The period between the publication of *Go Down, Moses* (1942) and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) was a fallow one for Faulkner; he spent much of it working in Hollywood for the insultingly low wage of three hundred dollars per week. He also began to feel his age; when America joined World War II he was reminded of his inability to contribute to the previous war effort. Whereas previously he had been rejected for physical reasons, this time he was too old. He conceived of a new novel in 1943, but the writing of it was extremely slow; it would not appear, as *A Fable*, until 1954. The most significant publication in this period was a collection of his previous work edited by Malcolm Cowley. This, more than anything, secured for Faulkner a reappraisal of his achievement and recognition among critics of his role in American letters.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Well before Cowley published *The Portable Faulkner* (1946), Faulkner had developed a strong following in France through the translations of Maurice Coindreau, a Princeton professor, of a number of Faulkner's novels in the 1930s, including *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *The Sound and the Fury*. Jean-Paul Sartre, the

French philosopher, alluded to Faulkner's influence when he told Malcolm Cowley, "to the youth of France, Faulkner is a god." But it was *The Portable Faulkner* that reintroduced Faulkner to his American audience. Cowley selected short stories and novel segments with the aim of presenting Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County as a Balzac-like imaginative universe unparalleled in American letters. In a very short period following the publication of Cowley's book, Faulkner went from a writer whose books were nearly all out of print to the recipient of the most prestigious recognitions for a writer, including election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1948, the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949, the National Book Award for Fiction in 1951, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1955.

In this period of rapid growth in Faulkner's national reputation, his works became the subject of a number of studies by scholars associated with the dominant form of literary criticism in the postwar period, the New Criticism. The earliest of these included Cleanth Brooks's *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* and Michael Millgate's *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, both published in 1963. Since then Faulkner's texts have been analyzed in interesting ways by nearly the full range of postwar literary and theoretical movements, including Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytical criticism; feminist, structuralist, and poststructuralist approaches; and the New Historicism and other cultural studies schools of the 1990s. His texts also lend themselves to interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches such as those coming from the law and literature movement of the 1990s and the more recent eco-criticism. Because of his material, his regional positioning, and the esteem in which his writing is held by many African-American, Native American, and Latin American writers, it is also natural to include Faulkner's texts in studies of these fields or in more general surveys of indigenous literatures, subaltern and postcolonial studies, and, as these movements developed in the late 1990s, even men's studies and studies of the cultural construction of whiteness.

Lawrence Schwartz argues in *Creating Faulkner's Reputation* (1988) that the reappraisal of Faulkner's work that immediately followed Cowley's *Portable Faulkner* coincided with, and to some extent drew strength from, a growing national interest during the postwar and Cold War eras in defining for external audiences the exceptional qualities of the American national identity. Faulkner, writer of over twenty books and countless short stories and essays, each dealing to some degree with the American experience, emerged as a likely candidate for this role.

Faulkner participated in diplomatic events sponsored by the State Department, beginning with a trip to South America in 1954 that included stops in Peru and Brazil. He made additional trips to Japan, Europe, and Iceland in the next year, and as late as 1961 visited Venezuela, again on behalf of the State Department. Faulkner gained from these engagements the satisfaction of serving his country and the opportunity to moralize about race relations in his native Mississippi without having to face directly the bitter response that such remarks elicited at home. Always something of a thorn in the side of his native town, Faulkner's moderate positions on race relations, and especially his statements in favor of integration, made Oxford an unpleasant place for him to reside. In 1959 he purchased a house in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he had already spent several semesters as writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia. In this home away from home he experienced the life of the country gentleman, riding horses with a local hunt club and forming close friendships with its members and with some of the professors at the university.

Although he loved the hunt, Faulkner took risks as a rider beyond what his aging body could sustain. In June of 1962 he took a fall from a horse that caused him severe back pain for many days. When the pain became excruciating, he began to drink heavily and to treat himself with tranquilizers and painkillers that had accumulated over the years. By the fifth of July his condition was bad enough that he allowed himself to be admitted to Byhalia sanitarium, approximately fifty miles north of Oxford. He died there of a heart attack in the early hours of 6 July 1962.

Commenting upon his great-grandfather's legacy in Oxford and the surrounding area, Faulkner once said that "he rode through that country like a living force." Forty years after Faulkner's death, it is the great-grandson who is still a felt presence in the town of Oxford, Mississippi, whose population has had to come to terms with the international significance of a local boy they once derided as a charlatan and a failure, one who achieved that significance by holding up a mirror to their greatness, as well as to their myriad forms of ruthlessness and desperation.

WORKS

- The Marble Faun* (1924)
- Soldiers' Pay* (1926)
- Mosquitoes* (1927)
- Sartoris* (1929)
- The Sound and the Fury* (1929)