Research writing assignment on william faulkner

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William Faulkner has achieved a greater influence on Southern writers than has any other. But his appeal is finally international, and he ranks among the greatest writers of his nation and century, as the continuous outpouring of criticism on his art testifies. William Cuthbert Falkner (he would later add the u dropped by his great-grandfather) was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on 25 September 1897 (Collins 42).

The son of Murry Cuthbert and Maud Butler Falkner, he soon moved with his family to Ripley, Mississippi, but after the births of two more sons -Murry and Johncy – the family moved to Oxford, Mississippi, in September 1902. Initially, Faulkner was a good student, but by the eighth grade he was bored with school and far more involved in his own reading and writing, as well as the activities of the community and his father's livery stable. By the eleventh grade, the final year in high school, he had dropped out of school, briefly returning to play football but leaving for good in the fall of 1915. He was not, however, totally alone in a hostile environment, for he always enjoyed hunting with other boys and men, and he had become involved in two relationships that altered his life and career. One was with Estelle Oldham. The other relationship was with Phil Stone, the scion of an established Oxford family, who was four years older than Faulkner and educated at Ole Miss and Yale.

Although Faulkner would have doubtlessly developed into a writer without Stone's influence, he benefited in a number of ways from their friendship in the early years of his career. One benefit to Faulkner from Stone's friendship occurred in spring 1918 when Estelle gave in to family pressure and agreed to marry Cornell Franklin. To help Faulkner through this difficult period and to

head off a possible elopement, Stone invited Faulkner to join him at Yale, where he was in law school. During the fall of 1921, after presenting Estelle Franklin with a gift volume of his poems, Vision in Spring, Faulkner went to New York, where he stayed with Stark Young and worked at a bookstore run by Elizabeth Prall.

As postmaster, Faulkner was a complete failure; he preferred to read and write-continuing to publish in the Mississippian and having one poem appear in the Double Dealer in June 1922. Stone helped to arrange the publication of his first volume of poems, The Marble Faun, with the Four Seas Company; Faulkner agreed to pay the $400 production costs. When his first novel was published on 25 February 1926, he was back in New Orleans with Spratling. Most of the first printing of Soldiers' Pay sold quickly, and the good reviews encouraged Faulkner to begin his third novel, Mosquitoes, which drew heavily on his New Orleans experiences with Anderson and his circle of friends and on Helen Baird, to whom he dedicated the novel, completed in September 1926 (Collins 115). Read about indirect competitors of Apple Two other works composed during these New Orleans periods were written expressly for Helen: Mayday and Helen: A Courtship. On 20 June 1929 he married Estelle, two months after her divorce was final, and he corrected the proofs of The Sound and the Fury on his honeymoon. He had accomplished two great personal goals: he had written his first truly great novel and had married the woman whom he had always loved. His marriage, however, never matched the success of his career, and although he wrote many great novels, he and Estelle were seldom happy together. In mid 1934 he worked on a series of stories about Bayard Sartoris for the Saturday Evening Post.

When he arrived back in Oxford in September 1934, he put Absalom aside and began work on Pylon. During the first half of 1937, still in Hollywood after several brief visits home, he revised his Bayard Sartoris stories and wrote a long, final story for the novel The Unvanquished, which was published in early 1938. By this time he had begun The Wild Palms and severely burned his back during a visit to New York. After the sale of The Unvanquished to Hollywood, he bought a farm not far from Oxford where Faulkner the novelist, who had never wanted to be seen as the literary man, could also be Faulkner the farmer. He finished The Wild Palms in June 1938.

He had also returned to the Snopes material, which he already knew would become a trilogy; the first volume of the trilogy was later entitled The Hamlet. In Europe, he traveled in France, Switzerland, England, and Italy; he became involved with yet another young woman, Jean Stein. In May 1962 Faulkner accepted the Gold Medal for Fiction of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in New York. He returned to Oxford in early June, and while he was there he had riding accident.

Making plans to buy an estate not far from Charlottesville, he relaxed at Rowan Oak. On 5 July he entered the hospital after a drinking bout and died there of a heart attack on 6 July, the old Colonel’s birthday. He was buried in St. Peter’s cemetery in Oxford on 7 July 1962.

Major themes In Race at Morning, one of Faulkner’s late stories written and sold to the Saturday Evening Post, Mister Ernest tells the disbelieving narrator, a young boy, that the boy must go to school. The boy wants to stay with Mister Ernest, farming and hunting and leading the kind of life he

observes the older man living. “ That ain’t enough any more [Mister Ernest tells him]. Time was when all a man had to do was just farm eleven and a half months, and hunt the other half. But not now.

Now just to belong to the farming business and the hunting business ain’t enough. You got to belong to the business of mankind” (Bradford 54). The boy must go to school to learn how to teach others not only what is right and wrong but, more important, why it is right and why the boy, later a man, acts the way he does. Thus, the boy must understand why maybe is “ the best word in our language, the best of all. That’s what mankind keeps going on: Maybe” (Bradford 54).

Mister Ernest realizes that man’s most difficult challenge is to face choosing and then accepting the responsibility of living with the consequences of that choice. Critics continue to debate the merits of Faulkner’s fiction; all agree that the greatest work began with The Sound and the Fury and continued through Go Down, Moses. Most concur that Faulkner wrote at least five or six truly great novels during that period. Faulkner felt compelled to affirm man’s ability to prevail over the human condition while he earlier denied that possibility. In all of Faulkner’s work – both early and late-there emerges, however, a consistency of themes and commitment. His Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech does anticipate A Fable, Race at Morning, and The Reivers, but it also incorporates As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom! , and The Wild Palms.

Faulkner’s major themes do not divide neatly into dark and light, despair and hope, tragic and comic. They do, in many ways, merge into Maybe. For

Faulkner, an individual who must live in the modern world faces the traps that other twentieth-century writers have explored: alienation, isolation, fragmentation. Sadness at a world bereft of values, moral certainty, or belief in anything shaped the young Faulkner's poetry and prose. The early work is filled with epicene, faunlike creatures who exist only half-formed in world-weary despair or ennui and are replaced by young men seeking meaning in what they perceive to be a meaningless world.

Their vision is turned inward, toward self, recoiling in horror from full involvement in the world around them; Little Sister Death lurks in the doorway, and they often turn to welcome her embrace. For Quentin Compson, this embrace results in his actual suicide; Horace Benbow, on the other hand, returns to Belle Mitchell and a death-in-life situation. Young Bayard Sartoris feels driven away from his family and the community as he pursues his own inevitable death in a plane crash, whereas Darl Bundren withdraws into insanity, unable to cope with his family's odyssey and his own ineffectual efforts to derive meaning from the lives around him. None of these men knows how to come to terms with time, history, the community, and Original Sin.

Eating the apple only assured the knowledge of good and evil, not of what is good and what is evil (Honnighausen 69). Thus, these great forces and influences overwhelm many Faulkner characters when they are unable to incorporate them into a whole rather than disparate fragments. For Faulkner, who chose to write mainly of Yoknapatawpha residents, Southerners were particularly appropriate examples of the universal condition of man

(Williamson 99). Yet he never saw the dilemmas or problems of his characters as unique to the South.

On the contrary, he found in his native region the strengths and weaknesses, the supports and threats that assail all people. Among those strengths is always community. At times it can be destructive, as when it is stirred by hatred, bigotry, and mindless respectability; however, in Faulkner it always provides the context, the framework in which people live their lives. It cannot save anyone, but it can help someone save himself. Joe Christmas in Light in August cannot fit, for he fails to learn who he is.

His is the tragedy of a man who becomes subsumed by a passion to discover his identity fixed forever in being white or black. Like Ahab pursuing Moby Dick, he refuses to compromise and propels himself toward destruction. Gail Hightower also cuts himself off from the community by pursuing his own obsessions to the destruction of his home and life. In contrast to them, Lena Grove and Byron Bunch elicit the strengths of the community as they grope toward a family unit and a stable existence.

This community does not depend upon some aristocracy at the top of a social hierarchy, but very often upon the yeoman farmer whose integrity and ties to the land make him able to reach out and embrace Lena and Byron. Similarly, in Intruder in the Dust the various elements of the community combine forces to save Lucas Beauchamp. Gavin Stevens, Aleck Sander, Chick Mallison, and Miss Habersham finally involve even the Gowries in proving Lucas's innocence. In the Snopes trilogy, Flem gains a wife, the

presidency of the bank, and the mansion, but again through Gavin Stevens and Chick Mallison and especially V. K.

Ratliff the community presides over Flem's self-ordained doom. The values of the community, chosen by Sarty Snopes in Barn Barning over his father's values, assure that Flem, who, unlike Sarty, chooses his own ruthless ambition over family, will face Mink's " bullet without an attempt to save himself" (Faulkner 19). In Faulkner's fiction those people who cut themselves off from the community deny themselves a vital strength and important foundation. History also figures in much of Faulkner's work. Certainly history haunts Gail Hightower, whose obsession with his grandfather's exploits in the Civil War prevents him from living in the present. In Go Down, Moses Ike McCaslin's reaction to his discovery of his family's history dooms him to " an ineffectual repudiation of the land and a hollow existence as every hunter's uncle and no child's father" (Faulkner 69).

Both Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon in Absalom, Absalom! maginatively reconstruct the past in order to understand the Sutpens' destruction. Quentin, however, cannot assimilate the past – his own in The Sound and the Fury or Sutpen's – and shivers in the cold, knowing he cannot move into the future. Shreve, his Canadian roommate, sees the search for the truth about the Sutpens as a challenging game and seems no wiser for his discoveries at the end of the novel. For these characters and others, time is a linear element that they hope to slice off as seconds on a clock.

For Faulkner, time past and time future are contained in time present. One cannot escape history, as Temple Drake discovers in Requiem for a Nun, nor

can one live successfully without history, as the Reporter sees in Pylon. Like Bayard Sartoris in The Unvanquished, man must learn from the past to live in a viable present, to adapt to change so that change will not control his existence (Honnighausen 50). That ability to live fully – to maintain standards of conduct and to strive to inculcate the verities of the human heart in oneself as well as others – is always balanced by the knowledge that man will not inhabit Eden again. There is no millenarianism in Faulkner. Some of his harshest criticism is leveled not at the villains Jason Compson, Flem Snopes, and Popeye but at ineffectual idealists: Gavin Stevens, Horace Benbow, and Ike McCaslin.

Certainly Jason Compson is a thoroughly despicable character who lacks any compassion or pity or love. Faulkner condemns those incapable of love and those who exploit the love of others. Yet such characters are as " easy" to condemn in fiction as they are in life. Love, of course, can also be destructive", as Harry Wilbourne discovers in The Wild Palms (Faulkner 145). But idealism and softheadedness can be equally as destructive and perhaps more harmful.

Stevens, Benbow, and McCaslin are indeed sympathetic characters, but they finally fail to do more good than harm. In Go Down, Moses and Light in August, Stevens obviously misinterprets the events he witnesses; and in Requiem for a Nun, The Town, and The Mansion, he does little more than maintain a watch. His self-righteousness and moral rigidity are no match for the forces at work in Linda Kohl, Temple Drake, or Flem Snopes. Benbow fares even worse, for in the face of evil he is powerless and collapses (Padgett 1).

Ike McCaslin is surely one of Faulkner's most appealing youths, but as a man he signs away his inheritance and, like Pilate, believes that he can escape responsibility for the failures of his family as well as for man's basic nature. Unable to be Christ, Ike crucifies the opportunities he has to use the past and his own ability in a meaningful, constructive way. Faulkner believed in man's ability to prevail over the tragedies of the human condition (Williamson 10). Readers will not find central heroes who achieve mindless happiness. That Evening Sun Faulkner That Evening Sun (1931) is the most complex example of the special demands put on the reader by an open ending. Faulkner's strategy, unlike the methods of Cheever, Hemingway, and Chekhov, increases the uncertainty of the ending while at the same time suspending the final action – Nancy's anticipated death at the hands of her husband Jesus.

The initial narrative strategy, for instance, is indirect. After opening logically and coherently with observations about Monday washing rituals, which seems to predict a contrast between the mechanized present and a slower, more genteel past, the narrator, Quentin, drifts from the discussion of all the Negro washerwomen to a particular one, Nancy, who could walk down a lane to a ditch near her house carrying a bundle on her head that never wobbled or wavered (Leona 5). She could crawl on her hands and knees through a fence, " her head rigid, uptilted, the bundle steady as a rock or a balloon, and rise to her feet again and go on," an image that implies repetition instead of requiring resolution and seems to mark a story in the indirect mode. Quentin passes to a memory of how Nancy worked for his family when Dilsey was sick and how the Compson children had to go to her house to

wake her. They attributed her slowness in getting up to her drinking; later they learn of Nancy's attempt to hang herself and hear of her taking drugs.

This discussion involves pure and not very accurate association – the assertion that Nancy was on cocaine was made by a jailer and does not seem likely, granted what seems to be more firsthand and therefore more reliable evidence in the rest of the story. Even the narrative voice is given to changing. Early in the story the narrator comments, with formal diction: " When Dilsey was sick in her cabin and Nancy was cooking for us, we could see her apron swelling out; that was before father told Jesus to stay away from the house"; after a passage of dialogue, without any other marker, the narrator changes to sentences with minimal embedding, repeating the same information: " Dilsey was still sick in her cabin. Father told Jesus to stay off our place.

Dilsey was still sick. It was a long time. We were in the library after supper" (p. 292).

Sentences have suddenly become a third of their former length; we seem to be in the mind of a child recalling verbatim his memories of the time, and that method continues for the rest of the story. At this point the story suddenly diverts to the direct mode. Nancy has a problem – to avoid a confrontation with her husband Jesus, who has reputedly returned and waits to punish her (the father of the child she will bear is a white man), and she works out her problem by a series of linear steps. She is at first satisfied to be escorted home by Mr. Compson – " If I can just get through the lane .

. I be all right then” (p. 294) – but Mrs. Compson objects to being left alone. Nancy is granted a pallet in the kitchen, but that solution does not overcome her fears, and she utters what Quentin Compson can call only “ the sound,” after which her pallet is moved to the children’s room.

Reading the story in the light of conventional narrative signals, we sense, as the action slows down and Nancy grows frantic – as she goes to any length, even salvaging popcorn kernels from the fire, to get the Compson children to stay-that the climax approaches (Leona 12). To amuse the children, Nancy begins to tell a story that only thinly disguises her own fears. Candace interrupts, believing that she hears someone approaching. Nancy does not want something to happen; she wants something not to happen. She does not want an end, especially not an end to herself: “ I aint going to see him again but once more, with that razor in his mouth” (p. 295).

Retardations of action become not so much signals of an approaching climax as correlatives of Nancy’s own internal state: facing what she regards as an inevitable end, she chooses to prolong the moment of its arrival as long as possible. The last thing Nancy wants is closure because the ambassador of closure has a razor in his mouth. The image of Nancy has developed over a curve of action, from the washerwoman with a “ balanced bundle and the hat that never bobbed or wavered,” to a woman who cannot hold a cup of coffee in her hands, to a tired woman sitting in the cabin with the door open. Imagery patterns have a completed antithetical balance; the coldness of the opening image, Nancy by a cold stove, is inverted in the heat and fumes of the cabin and Nancy burning her hands on the lamp. Nancy’s terror has its

climax in the tears that run down her face, “ each one a little turning ball of firelight” (p.

306). Her comment following father’s arrival, after which she subsides into acceptance of her fate – “ I reckon what I going to get aint no more than mine” – is the opposite of her reiterated complaint that “ it aint no fault of mine. ” The restless movement of her hands has subsided: “ She talked quieter now, and her face looked quiet, like her hands” (p. 308).

If we can ignore for a moment certain difficulties with the final paragraphs and certain structural problems, we can see that within That Evening Sun rests an essentially complete story, that of Nancy’s undoing for reasons real or imagined. Seen in this context, That Evening Sun is a complete depiction of social and psychological ruin, a reading that is further clarified when one sets the story in the context of the last of the village section of The Collected Stories, a section which, as Philip Momberger has argued, reveals a total destruction of the sense of village, the sense of community. As complete as this version might be, we must still take into account the suspension created by the structure and the final paragraphs. Faulkner obscures, even contradicts, the sense of finality created by many elements of the story.

He has constantly shifted the reader’s expectation by alternating the direct and indirect methods, and he has given strong indications that Nancy is building her own fears. He has opened up the final passages – Nancy returns to her previous abjuration of responsibility (“ It aint no fault of mine”), the “ sound” commences again – and then he ends on the discordance of the children’s squabble, its comic tonality remote from the anger and rebellion

that Jesus’ intentions supposedly represent. And above all the action is incomplete, making us wonder whether we are to assume that Nancy dies or does not die, or whether we are meant to hold the end in suspended judgment.