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# William Faulkner
# *The Sound and the Fury*

Michael Cotsell

"'Hush now', she said.... So I hushed. Caddy smelled like trees in the rain."

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## Publication Data

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# *The Sound and the Fury*

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# Chapter 1: An Introduction to Faulkner's Life and Work

## 1. 1 'Yoknapatawpha County'

William Faulkner[1] published *The Sound and the Fury* in the United States in October 1929, the same month and year as the Great Stock Market Crash—a coincidence that Faulkner's character Jason would have grimly enjoyed—and the year that Faulkner married his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham.

Faulkner was born in 1897 and died in 1962. Most of his novels are set around the area where he lived for much of his life, Oxford, Mississippi, a small college town in the northern part of the state and home to the University of Mississippi ('Ole Miss'). Faulkner called Oxford 'Jefferson' in his fiction and the surrounding Lafayette County became the now famous 'Yoknapatawpha County' 'my own little postage stamp of native soil'.[2] The fictional versions of both are not simple copies: Faulkner's county, for instance, is much larger, and his renderings of Jefferson never directly depict the University of Mississippi, thus allowing it to represent an average town. The nearest city is Jackson (subsequently, like Oxford itself, infamous in the annals of Civil Rights); the nearest big city, fascinating and dangerous Memphis, notorious for its saloons, brothels and crime rate. Other settings, particularly New Orleans, appear in Faulkner's fiction, notably in *Mosquitoes* (1927) and *Wild Palms* (1939), but remote and generally obscure Yoknapatawpha County was certainly the place to which Faulkner's imagination kept returning. In fact, to understand Faulkner, we need to understand that his imagination works very powerfully through the local. Oxford and Lafayette County, however, open out to the state of Mississippi, the American South and hence America as a whole. Today, Faulkner is a novelist whose enormous literary skill, psychological depth, and sense of history give his work global cultural and

1 Faulkner changed the spelling of his family name from 'Falkner' to 'Faulkner,' believing that was the spelling in his great-grandfather's time. In this study 'Falkner' will be used for the generations before the novelist, 'Faulkner' for the novelist and his and succeeding generations.

2 'Interview with Jean Stein Van den Heuvel', first published in *The Paris Review* (Spring 1956), reprinted in *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner*, 1926–1962, ed. James Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), 255.

political significance. Indeed, since it may be argued that the American South now dominates global politics, it may be argued that Faulkner has become increasingly relevant. This relevance is unlikely to diminish: his style astonishes and thrills us; his characters and their situations are unforgettable; no-one explores the dark side of the family or mental disintegration more deeply; and he writes with great insight into racial attitudes. His work has been a rich influence on world fiction since his time including Southern fiction by women and African-Americans and what is called postcolonial fiction.

Faulkner's fiction, which includes novels and short stories, may be divided into four main groupings: early fiction, chronicle fiction, contemporary fiction, and 'commitment' fiction.

## 1.2 Early Fiction

Faulkner began writing short stories in New Orleans under the influence of one of America's great short story writers, Sherwood Anderson, the author of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) His early fiction includes the stories later collected as *New Orleans Sketches* (1958); a novel about the impact of World War I, *Soldier's Pay* (1926); and *Mosquitoes* (1927), a satirical novel in the style of Aldous Huxley, also set in New Orleans. These works were greeted enthusiastically by Southern intellectuals. Poet Donald Davidson thought *Soldiers' Pay* to be the work of a writer with 'a fine power of objectifying his own and other's emotions, an artist in language, a sort of poet turned into prose'. Along with Hemingway, Faulkner was quickly identified as one of the emerging voices of a new generation.[1]

## 1.3 The Chronicles

Many of Faulkner's works are in whole or part long family chronicles or sagas that depend on evoking the glory of previous Southern generations, including founders of dynasties and combatants in the Civil War. These men are heroes in the grand fashion of Thomas Carlyle, author of *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841), 'cavaliers' (an important Southern term) of energy, high humour and madness. They also express reckless Southern individualism a rejection of Northern constraint and even morality and are touched by the idea of Nietzsche's *űbermensch* (superman) as developed in

1 O. B. Emerson, *Faulkner's Early Reputation in America* (Ann Arbour, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984), 46, 69, etc

his *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–5) and elsewhere. Their stories are tales of sound and fury indeed; of dynasty founded on nothing but crude will; a 'natural' aristocracy. Among such chronicles are large sections of *Flags in the Dust* (written 1926–7, published 1973), much of which was revised as *Sartoris* (1929); *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), generally regarded as the best of this kind and as one of Faulkner's great achievements; and *The Unvanquished* (1938), along with many short stories.

Mad gallantry in war speaks of the indomitable spirit, but the best go down. The succeeding generations of men fare less well. They are of the defeated, reduced to self-destructive gestures, or to a masculinity that is gradually reduced by women, through the exercise of a kind of mindlessly obsessive gentility, until families peter out in impotency, incest, miscegenation, suicide and idiocy. What was once epic becomes the pathetic and absurd tragicomedy of imitated and outdated manners that have to make up for everything that hasn't happened and hasn't been there. Faulkner captures something that was real in the South: 'Unregenerate Southerners were trying to live the good life on a shabby equipment, and they were grotesque in their effort to make an art out of living when they were not decently making the living.'[1] 'Stripped of their wealth former slave owning families clung to totems that symbolized their privileged past… They maintained an air of supremacy amid altered socio-economic realities.'[2] Such persons often invested deeply in the myth of the 'Lost Cause' of the Confederacy and of an idealized Old South. Here the matter of the chronicle novels connects with that of *The Sound and Fury*, which does not, however, with the exception of a single reference, include ancestors or Civil War heroes. By no means all Southerners bought into this myth, however.

In many of his novels and stories, Faulkner weaves the histories of various prominent Lafayette County families, some based on historical figures, some of his invention. Faulkner's four main fictional dynastic families are the Sutpens, the Sartorises, the McCallisters and the Compsons of *The Sound and the Fury*. With the exception of the Compsons, who, like the Falkners and Faulkner himself, live in Oxford, they inhabit the surrounding county rather than the town. Critic Arthur Kinney has edited a series of substantial volumes of critical essays on each of them.[3] All of them have ancestors who in Ante-Bellum (pre-Civil War) days and even after had pretensions to

1 From John Crowe Ransom, 'Reconstructed but Unregenerate,' in *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The Southern Agrarian Tradition* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1930), 14.

2 *Voices of the American South*, General Editor, Suzanne Disheroon-Green (New York: Pearson Longman 2005), 537.

3 The relevant collection is Arthur P. Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982).