

Literature Insights

Reading

William Faulkner

The Sound and the Fury

by Michael Cotsell

“‘Hush now’,
she said.... So I
hushed. Caddy
smelled like trees
in the rain.”

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The Sound and the Fury

Michael Cotsell

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A Note on the Author

Dr. Michael Cotsell is an Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of Delaware. He was the one time Associate Editor of the Dickens Companions series to which he contributed *The Companion to 'Our Mutual Friend'* (Edinburgh University press, 1986) and the General Editor of the Series English Literature and the Wider World for which he edited the volume *Creditable Warriors: English Literature and the Wider World, 1830–76* (Ashfield Press, 1990). He has edited the World's Classics edition of *Our Mutual Friend* and volumes of critical essays on *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities* and is the author of *Barbara Pym* (MacMillan, 1989).

Dr. Cotsell's most recent book is *The Theater of Trauma: American Modernist Drama and the Psychological Struggle for the American Mind, 1900–1930* (Peter Lang, 2005). He continues to work on psychiatry and American Modernism.

Preface and Acknowledgements

This study is for Rachel Eliza Griffiths.

This study is intended for first-time readers of *The Sound and the Fury* and—since it offers new scholarship and critical argument on Faulkner—for established critics and scholars. Unlike the many ‘Guides to’ and ‘Notes on’ Faulkner’s novel on the market, this study aims to be accessible without simplification.

Chapter 1 provides some general context about Faulkner’s life and work. It also includes a brief introduction to the form and style of Faulkner’s novel and summaries of the novel’s four narratives. The first-time reader may want to begin with the summaries (Chapter 1.9). Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the contexts of Southern history and Faulkner’s family history. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the influences on Faulkner of Modernist literature and Modernist psychology and philosophy. It is impossible to discuss Faulkner adequately without being drawn into psychological theories—he is an intensely psychological novelist who lived in intensely psychological times. To help you a brief ‘Glossary of Psychological Terms’ is provided at the end of the book.

Chapter 4 gives a close commentary on each of the four narratives and their total statement. If you are reading this book for the first time, you might well choose to read Chapter 4 before Chapters 2 and 3.

I am grateful to the following who read the typescript and made many useful comments: Dr Charles W. R. D. Moseley, Dr Susan Thomas, Michael Green, and Dr John Jebb. Thanks also to Suzanne Potts.

Quotations are from William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

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

1.1 'Yoknapatawpha County'

William Faulkner¹ 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 political significance. Indeed, since it may be argued that the American South now

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- 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.

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 *übermensch* (superman) as developed in 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,

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

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 the 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 form part of a local aristocracy.

Of course, it would have been strange for Faulkner to write about anything else than Southern history, as this was *recent modern history* to him, as Balzac's Paris,

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).

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