

Reading William Faulkner

Go Down, Moses & Big Woods



John Lennard

Literature Insights
General Editor: Charles Moseley

Reading William Faulkner

Go Down, Moses & Big Woods

John Lennard

HEB ☀ HUMANITIES-EBOOKS

To Buy This Book

If this is what you are looking for please

Buy this Book

or

Browse our lists

Pdf Ebook Features:

**elegantly formatted
fixed page formats are easily cited
high quality graphics
internal and external hyperlinks
easy navigation by bookmarks
ideal for laptops, desktops and tablets**

**The book is yours to keep - and a copy is stored on
your bookshelf in case you lose it.**

We also sell:

Kindle editions from Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk

Paperbacks from Lulu.com and Troubador.co.uk

Library Editions from MyiLibrary and EBSCO

COPYRIGHT

© John Lennard, 2012

The Author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published by *Humanities-Ebooks, LLP*,
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

ISBN 978-1-84760-198-8 Pdf
ISBN 978-1-84760-199-5 Kindle

Contents

Preface

1. William Faulkner, 1897–1962

1.1 The weight of inheritance

1.2 Youth and war, 1897–1927

1.3 Authorship and Hollywood, 1927–50

1.4 The Nobel Prize and after, 1950–62

2. Yoknapatawpha County

2.1. Geography, history, and real-world reference

2.2. Sartoris, Benbow, Compson, Sutpen, and McCaslin

2.3. Snopes

2.4. ‘Whites, 6298; Negroes, 9313’

3. Faulkner’s ‘difficult style’

3.1. Prolixity, repetition, and hyperextension

3.2. Missing and unexpected punctuation

3.3. Orality, dialects, and intersecting stories

3.4. The complex canon

4. *Go Down, Moses* (1942)

4.1. ‘Was’

4.2. ‘The Fire and the Hearth’

4.3. ‘Pantaloons in Black’

4.4. ‘The Old People’

4.5. ‘The Bear’

4.6. ‘Delta Autumn’

4.7. ‘Go Down, Moses’

6 Reading William Faulkner

5. *Big Woods* (1955)

5.1. *'The Bear' and 'The Old People' recontextualised*

5.2. *'A Bear Hunt'*

5.3. *'Race at Morning'*

5.4. *The prologue, interchapters, and epilogue*

6. Bibliography

6.1. *Prose Works by Faulkner*

6.2. *Selected criticism of Faulkner*

6.3. *Websites*

Preface

Literature Insights are determinedly short, and in general seek to provide answers (and provoke questions) rather than assuming knowledge. Typically they deal only briefly with an author's life and for most of their length concentrate on a single book—but with Faulkner that approach creates a number of problems, and this Insight adopts a rather different strategy.

The problem lies partly in the interconnectedness of so many of Faulkner's works—stories and novels set in the same fictional county, with shared casts, that intersect and entangle—and partly in his characteristic and challenging prose, as much as any of the characters an active presence in all his fiction. Both features are at the heart of Faulkner's greatness as an artist, but they also mean that the reader new to Faulkner has an enormous amount of backstory to try to assimilate, despite his style, and that wherever a reader may begin, the same orientation is required.

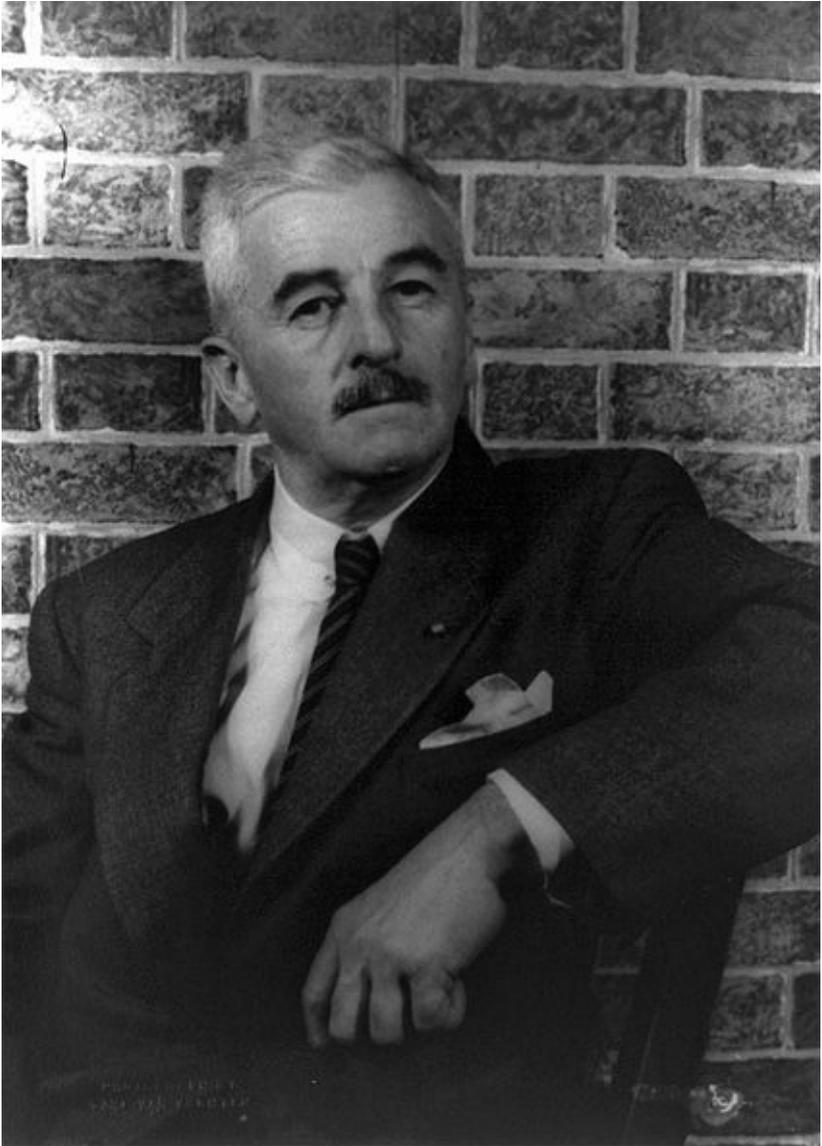
The first half of this Insight therefore provides such an orientation, in chapters devoted to Faulkner's life; to his principal fictional world, Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, and the sprawling families he peopled it with; and to that challenging prose style. As with Joyce, it is Faulkner's prose that is primarily responsible for his reputation as a 'difficult' writer to study, and no scholarly explanation or critical guide can make it any more grammatical or conventionally punctuated than it is. Faulkner was a full-blown, major Modernist who pushed the boundaries of syntax and form, so his style must be acknowledged, in all its glory and wildness. But readers finding him at first hard going (as many do) should be neither alarmed nor disheartened, for once one understands in overview what Faulkner was about there is much method in his seeming madness.

In the second half, chapters 4–5 turn directly to *Go Down, Moses* and *Big Woods*, dealing with the component stories of each in detail. Experienced readers of Faulkner should proceed as they will; the inexperienced are strongly recommended to read in chapter order, building up the framework that will enable them to appreciate the place each of his fictions has in a massively greater whole.

8 Reading William Faulkner

Given the need for so much fictional and critical background, I have presumed that readers are familiar with some basic historical facts, of chattel slavery in the American South, and of the Civil War of 1861–5 with the ‘Jim Crow’ politics that followed it; and further presumed, in chapters 4–5, that readers have already read *Go Down, Moses* and *Big Woods*—partly because only limited quotation is possible (both remain in copyright until 1 January 2033), and partly because even very full quotation cannot well convey the experience of reading Faulkner’s extraordinary prose.

All references to Faulkner’s novels are to the five-volume Library of America edition.



William Faulkner
Photographed in December 1954 by Carl van Vechten

1. William Faulkner, 1897–1962

The place of biography in criticism is a minefield of potential errors, and nowhere more so than in Faulkner studies. As Faulkner was a Southerner who wrote of the South, a man who wrote of masculinity, a farmer and hunter who wrote of farmers hunting, a pilot who wrote of flying, and an alcoholic who wrote of drinking, temptations to read Faulkner's life into his fictions are rife—and to deny its relevance would be foolish. But at the same time it is fatally easy, in exploring fictions biographically, to become reductive, ignoring complications—the transformations to which Faulkner subjected *all* his material, and his fertile profundity of imagination. Both knowledge of 'the facts' and subtler considerations of the particular history through which Faulkner lived are illuminating, and this chapter provides them—but readers are also warned, loudly, that for everything in his fictions that seemingly corresponds to a biographical reality, at least two other things don't.

It is sometimes taken to be self-evident that 'writers write best about what they know', implying that autobiographically sourced fictions are intrinsically preferable. But what a writer knows is not limited to personal experience—which includes reading, fantasizing, lying—and the shaping of stories (including biographies) is *always* in part the province of imagination. Just how far from sense biographical criticism can stray has been superbly demonstrated by James Shapiro in *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (2010), and it should always be fiercely remembered that *Othello* is not an interesting play because Shakespeare was black, nor because he murdered his wife, nor even because he wanted to murder his wife, but because in it he imagined certain personalities and passions, ordering his imaginings into a drama that was compelling at the time and has remained so long after the world he lived in and wrote for passed into history.

1.1 The weight of inheritance

The dominant unit in most of Faulkner's fictions is not the individual but the family. Whether in terms of daily reality—the presence (or absence) and personalities of grand/parents, siblings and cousins—or in the less tangible and reliable terms of an imposed inheritance that confers identity, social status, and expectations regardless of personal qualities, family shapes everyone. It is most obvious in wealthy or privileged elites, which in Faulkner's Mississippi, as in his fiction, meant the families who had until the Civil War been planters and big slaveholders, mansion-dwellers fallen on hard times as modernity bore down, but it is equally true of the middle-class and poor white families who as voters politically replaced the planter-class. Blood, after all, is thicker than water—and blood as a theme speaks to both family and race, whose intersection consistently fascinated Faulkner.

His own family—spelled 'Falkner' until he unilaterally changed it in his late teens—was of some distinction, but more in the way of quite big fish in fairly small ponds than the romanticized, genuinely wealthy plantocracy of *Gone with the Wind*.¹ William Clark Falkner (1825–89), the writer's great-grandfather, came from Tennessee to Ripley in northern Mississippi in the 1840s. He married well, claiming high respectability, but also had a strong streak of violent self-indulgence. As a young man he served as a soldier, and lost three fingers in a brawl; in 1849 he killed a man in what was adjudged self-defence; and at the beginning of the Civil War (1861–5) he raised a volunteer company of the Confederate States Army, of which he was elected Colonel and which fought at Bull Run (or First Manassas) in July 1861. But however dashing a figure he cut, the Colonel's recklessness with others' lives as well as his own was unwelcome both to his men and his superiors, and his military career did not in reality last long, though it passed into imposing local legend. After the war the 'old Colonel' became an entrepreneur, principally in railroads, laying the foundations of a modest family fortune, and also a writer, with one significant success, *The White Rose of Memphis* (1880). His

1 For the biographical facts in this chapter I draw on both Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner: A Biography* (2 vols, 1974) and Jay Parini's more recent *One Matchless Time: A Life of William Faulkner* (2004).

12 Reading William Faulkner

recklessness eventually caught up with him in 1889, when he was shot to death by a business partner.

In the way of some communities, John Wesley Thompson Falkner (1848–1922), the Colonel's eldest son and Faulkner's paternal grandfather, inherited his father's rank, and being known as the 'young Colonel' imposed an identity he both embraced and rejected. On one hand he enjoyed the local importance of being his father's son, but on the other wanted a more socially respectable and peaceful life, and as a young adult moved 40 miles south-west to Oxford, the county seat and from 1848 the home of 'Ole Miss', the University of Mississippi. He married Sallie McAlpine Murry (1850–1906), of Scottish descent and strong Methodist as well as Confederate belief—a potent presence in Faulkner's early childhood. As a businessman with fingers in many pies the 'young Colonel' seems to have diminished rather than increased the wealth he inherited, but built himself a palatial home and lived in some style. In later life he became president of his own bank and served as a Deputy U.S. Attorney, a state senator, and a trustee of the University, largely by dabbling both with the plantocrats and gentry (closer to his ideals) and, when it suited him, with the virulently racist populism of state governors James K. Vardaman (1861–1930) and Theodore G. Bilbo (1877–1947). By all accounts a difficult and overbearing man who did his children (and at least one grandchild) considerable damage, the 'young Colonel' was also a dedicated drinker, and alcoholism ran consistently in Falkner men.

Murry Cuthbert Falkner (1870–1932), Faulkner's father, seems to have been even less able than the 'young Colonel' to cope with the identity inheritance imposed on him. An unsuccessful businessman who dreamed of 'going West' but never did and lived largely on his father's coat-tails, he was also a heavy drinker and as a young man a brawler, who once got himself shot. Perhaps the most rebellious thing he ever did was to marry Maud Butler (1871–1960) in 1896, even though she was a graduate of Mississippi Women's College, and despite the fact that her father, the Oxford town marshal in the 1870s and 1880s, had scandalously absconded with several thousand dollars, abandoning his family. Maud was iron-willed and religious, and the couple ill-matched, living in a tense relationship that favoured

mutual blame and lacked both realism and communication. From 1901 Maud's mother, Lelia Swift Butler, lived with her daughter's family, and her death in 1907, when Faulkner was nine, is (with the slightly earlier death of Sallie Murry Falkner) the earliest distinct event in his emotional life to be recognisably refracted in his fiction.

From this genetic, historic, and behavioural stew, Faulkner inherited at least three things that mattered. The greatest was a legacy of enthrallment to an overblown legend of personal valour with (supposed) historic import, the 'old Colonel's' military swagger and vain-glory entwining with the defeated aspirations and romanticized inhumanity of the Confederate dream. With it came a chronic financial anxiety born in post-war depression of mixed socio-political responsibilities (in the way of Confederate gentlemen) and socio-religious aspirations (in the way of Confederate ladies). And with both came a predisposition to alcoholism that Faulkner embraced from his teens to the day he died, a pure love of whiskey, taken alone or in company, in quantities that astonished all who witnessed it. Between them the three were responsible for much misery and erratic behaviour in Faulkner's life, as well as his early death, but they also constituted a crucial matrix for the astonishing fictions he produced.

1.2 Youth and war, 1897–1927

William Cuthbert Faulkner was born in September 1897, the eldest of Murry's and Maud's four children; brothers Murry Charles ('Jack'), John Wesley Thompson, III ('Johncy'), and Dean Swift were born in 1898, 1901, and 1907. As the eldest son Faulkner felt a sense of obligation to his siblings, and later took financial responsibility both for Johncy and, after Dean's death in an air crash in 1935, for his widow and posthumous daughter. Jack was more successful, being wounded and decorated in World War One and enjoying a long career as an FBI Special Agent—so a degree of sibling rivalry must be considered. So too should the absence of a sister—an essential ingredient of Southern romance—and the consequent positions of Faulkner's grandmother and mother in a household with a weak father but dominated until 1922 by the proximity and very public patriarchy of the

‘young Colonel’.

There was also from 1901 a black nanny, ‘Mammy Callie’, a tremendous, tiny woman whose death aged 100 in 1940 prompted Faulkner’s remarkable dedication of *Go Down, Moses* ‘To MAMMY / CAROLINE BARR / Mississippi / [1840–1940] / Who was born in slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation or recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love’. A second and surrogate mother, a constant black presence in the innermost household, at once intimate, personally reserved, and socially othered by race, Mammy Callie informs many figures in Faulkner’s fiction, including Mollie Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses*—but in her diminutive stature, personal dignity, and hard-working old age challenges the stereotype of the ‘black mama’ defined (almost as Faulkner wrote) by the performance of Hattie McDaniel (1895–1952) in the 1939 film of *Gone with the Wind*.

Faulkner attended local elementary and high schools, and eventually ‘Ole Miss’, but graduated from neither and seems to have been a lazy, indifferent student. He did, however, read voraciously, in French as well as English—Balzac was an important model—and from his teens, after meeting Phil Stone, a local graduate of Ole Miss and Yale, he began exploring Modernist literature, including the poetry of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, and the prose of Lawrence, Woolf, and Joyce. Oxford, MS, was, despite its university, a small provincial town, but through its moneyed elite there were wider contacts and horizons, including *avant garde* literary ones; that said, it is clear also that a major part of Faulkner’s education was grounded not in books but in experience.

Both the ‘young Colonel’ and Murry Falkner hunted as an annual ritual and Faulkner was from 1904, when he was seven, taken to hunting and fishing camps in the river bottoms—male preserves he described in ‘The Bear’, with whisky passing, stories by firelight, and the rite of ‘bleeding’ as a tangible sign of maturity. He also spent time around the men who hung out at the livery stables his father ran for the first decade of the century, before the coming of the motor-car, when horses were still a serious business—another fount of real and tall tales, encompassing backwoods bootleggers and Memphis

gangsters as well as hunting stories. Winding through all the tales, as through the activities of Sallie Murry Falkner (a vocal member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy), was the Civil War, the 'Old Colonel' riding gloriously through the refracted realities and tales of blood.

Although that war and the secessionist, ever-slaveholding dream over which it was fought had ended 32 years before Faulkner's birth and five years before his father's, it had been a formative teenage experience for his grandparents, both as ideological intoxication and increasingly bitter reality—so it was endlessly refought in the decades of defeat. The sack of Oxford in 1864 brought home the decline of the plantocracy, and such war-damage, with ruthless exploitation of the depressed post-war South by northern 'carpet-baggers' during Reconstruction, drove the rise of populist racists like Vardaman and Bilbo. Throughout Faulkner's lifetime the legacies of the war remained profound daily realities in the 'Jim Crow' South it spawned, and with the emergence after 1945 of the Civil Rights campaign became matters of urgent national as well as regional concern. One should also remember that the Civil War marked a major military development in industrialisation; it remains the deadliest war in US history, its c.620,000 military deaths representing 10% of Northern males aged 20–45 and 30% of Southern males aged 18–40—an inconceivable scale of loss with very long-lasting effects.

After leaving school in 1916 Faulkner was set to work in his grandfather's bank, and sheer boredom is enough to explain his desire to enlist after the US entered World War One in 1917. He also suffered a romantic crisis when his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham (1896–1972), married Cornell Franklin, whom her family found more suitable. The aerial dogfights over France had seized Faulkner's imagination as soon as they began to be reported, and when short stature disbarred him from army service (for which brother Jack volunteered in 1917) he hatched a plan to join the Canadian squadron of the British Royal Air Force, pretending British nationality. The plan actually worked, to a point, and from July–November 1918 Faulkner did train—and was discharged with thanks but no 'wings' immediately after the Armistice. For many years he exaggerated this expe-

To Buy This Book

If this is what you are looking for please

Buy this Book

or

Browse our lists

Pdf Ebook Features:

**elegantly formatted
fixed page formats are easily cited
high quality graphics
internal and external hyperlinks
easy navigation by bookmarks
ideal for laptops, desktops and tablets**

**The book is yours to keep - and a copy is stored on
your bookshelf in case you lose it.**

We also sell:

Kindle editions from Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk

Paperbacks from Lulu.com and Troubador.co.uk

Library Editions from MyiLibrary and EBSCO