

## Introduction

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### The "Little Postage Stamp of Soil": Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County

Spring, 2008  
Mondays, March 24-April 21  
3-4:15 pm, Miami University Art Museum

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**I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.**

--William Faulkner, *Nobel Prize address, December 1950*

William Faulkner stands astride 20th century literature like a colossus. To explore the works of this Nobel prize-winning author, we'll read and discuss one or more short stories and novels, including the challenging *As I Lay Dying* and the no-holds-barred challenging *The Sound and the Fury*.

*Instructor:* **Cleve Callison**, general manager of WMUB Public Radio, has a B.A. from Duke University, and an M.A. and Ph.D in English from the University of Wisconsin, specializing in Anglo-Saxon literature. He has taught ILR courses on Anglo-Saxon England, History of the English Language, William Shakespeare and Geoffrey Chaucer.

Contact Cleve at (513) 529-5958; [callistc@muohio.edu](mailto:callistc@muohio.edu)

#### **Recommended texts:**

Any collection of Faulkner short stories that includes at least "A Rose for Emily" and other major stories; I will be referencing page numbers from *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (Vintage, 1995)

Any edition of *As I Lay Dying*; I will be referencing page numbers from the Vintage edition

Any edition of *The Sound and the Fury*; I will be referencing page numbers from the Vintage edition

Note: these 2 novels and *Light in August* are collected in a handy "Oprah's Book Club" box set (Vintage, 2005).

## I. Resources

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**...the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed – love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.**

--William Faulkner, *Nobel Prize address, December 1950*

### **William Faulkner on the Web**

(<http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/faulkner.html>)  
Not an elegant site, but a useful source of all kinds of information and links about Faulkner, from the English Department at Ole Miss in Faulkner's home town of Oxford, Mississippi

### **Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*: A Hypertext**

(<http://www.usask.ca/english/faulkner/main/index.html>)  
Almost the polar opposite of the one above: a thoughtful and imaginative web approach to a difficult novel, from the English Department of the University of Saskatchewan

### **Faulkner's 1949 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, December 1950**

([http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html))  
The type is hard to read (see the Appendix to this study guide for a transcription), but the page also contains a link to Faulkner's audio recording of the speech.

Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (LSU Press, 1990 reissue)

A lucid and sympathetic reading of Faulkner's career and output by a major traditional critic of the 20th century. (Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, both Southerners, wrote the highly influential *Understanding Poetry*, which went through several editions and helped usher in the era of "New Criticism").

Edmond Volpe, *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner: The Novels* (2nd edition, Syracuse University Press, 2003)

A pretty-much-conventional summary and elucidation of all 19 of Faulkner's novels.

Malcolm Cowley, ed. *The Portable Faulkner* (Viking, 1946 and reprinted since).

Unique among Faulkner anthologies, now commonplace but then unknown. This volume was instrumental in the "re-discovery" of Faulkner after a long period of neglect and in fact probably led to his

I. Resources

being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. It is distinctive for two reasons. 1) By excerpting chronologically from many novels and short stories, it demonstrated the essential unity of Faulkner's vision. 2) Cowley requested that Faulkner give readers some help by writing a brief introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*. Instead he produced a lengthy meditation on history and the doom of the Compson family, including new characters and events that at times contradict – or at least lie outside – the 1929 novel. To many readers the introduction is an integral part of the novel itself.

## II. Background

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**[Man] is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.**

--William Faulkner, *Nobel Prize address, December 1950*

### Topics and themes:

The nature of time.

The decay of the Southern aristocracy.

The chivalric ideal and reality.

Tradition vs. modernism.

The nature of heroism.

The relationships between:

--blacks and whites

--men and women

--rich and poor

--old and young

The "burden of Southern history" (historian C. Vann Woodward's term)

Symbolism – Christian and otherwise

### Terms:

**Intentional Fallacy** — A term used by some critics who stress the primacy of the text over what are presumed to be the intentions of the author. Unlike the **pathetic fallacy**, the intentional fallacy is a term directed at readers and critics. Since the only way we would have of judging the author's intent is from the text itself, this argument goes, the intentional fallacy leads us to either mis-infer the author's real motives, or else read into the text our own thoughts and emotions in where they may not be present.

**Pathetic Fallacy** — A term used by some critics of writing which attributes moods or even emotions to the natural world instead of to the characters in the writing (for example, "a gloomy sky"). Unlike the **intentional fallacy**, the pathetic fallacy is a term directed (with varying degrees of scorn) at writers.

### III. "A Rose for Emily"

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**The past is never dead. It's not even past.**

--Gavin Stevens, in Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*, I.iii

#### **Topics and themes:**

How does Faulkner manipulate the chronological time in this story?

--How is the chronology at odds with the order of scenes as the reader encounters them?

--What is the effect of this manipulation?

--(please note that 'manipulation' is not necessarily a negative term!)

The unnamed narrator speaks only in the plural. How would you describe the narrator, and tell some of the characteristics of him/her – or even them (at least one critic has described the narrator as the collective mind of the town).

How does Faulkner make us feel pity or sympathy for Emily? How does he distance us from her?

Are there elements in the story which (apart from their narrative role) seem to be especially symbolic? Of what?

Describe the town and the changes it goes through in the course of the story.

At what point do the townspeople know the secret of the house?

--At what point does the reader know?

List some of the principle Gothic elements in the story.

#### **Terms:**

**Gothic** — A genre of literature dating from mid-18th century fiction that combines elements of horror and romance. Ingredients may include the supernatural, psychological and/or physical terror, ghosts, haunted houses, Gothic architecture, darkness, decay, tyrants, madness, death and the *frisson* arising from "a pleasing sort of terror".

## A Timeline for "A Rose for Emily"

(dates conjectural)

Order	Year	Event	Story sequence
I	1852	Emily is born	?
II	1884	Emily's father dies	6, 8
III	1884-5	Homer Barron appears	9
IV	1885-6	Homer disappears	7, 10
V	1885-6	Smell appears	5
VI	1894	Colonel Sartoris remits Emily's taxes	2
VII	1901-05	Emily discontinues china painting lessons	11
VIII	1906-07	Colonel Sartoris dies	4
IX	1916	tax delegation visits Emily	3
X	1926	Emily dies; funeral	1, 12
XI	1926	Entry into house	13

(some material adapted by Sara E. Selby, Waycross College, from Cleanth Brooks' **William Faulkner: Towards Yoknapatawpha and Beyond**)

Story sequence	Event	Order	Year
1	Emily dies; funeral (1st mention)	X	1926
2	Colonel Sartoris remits Emily's taxes	VI	1894
3	tax delegation visits Emily	IX	1916
4	Colonel Sartoris dies	VIII	1906-07
5	Smell appears	V	1885-6
6	Emily's father dies	II	1884
7	Homer appears	IV	1885-6
8	Emily buys poison	IV	1885-6
9	Homer disappears (1st time)	IV	1885-6
10	Homer disappears (2nd time)	IV	1885-6
11	Emily discontinues china painting lessons	VII	1901-05
12	Emily dies; funeral (2nd mention)	X	1926
13	Entry into house	XI	1926

## IV. *As I Lay Dying*

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**As I lay dying the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyelids for me as I descended into Hades.**

--Ghost of Agamemnon, Homer's *Odyssey*, Book XI

### Topics:

Faulkner's use of the stream of consciousness technique.

Which character is the most sympathetic? Which is the least sympathetic?

(*Not the same questions!*) Who are the most reliable narrator(s)? Who are the least?

Some of Darl's chapters narrate scenes where he is not physically present.

Does this undercut the narrative? How does he know what happens?

The stated reason for the journey is to bury Addie. But most characters also have another reason for the trip. What are they, and what do they tell us about the characters?

At least one character appears to oppose the journey. Is this point of view reinforced by the events and structure of the novel?

Why do you suppose that Faulkner leaves out entirely any 3rd-person "author" voice? How might the novel have been different if he had not done so?

At various times the novel has been called heroic (and anti-heroic), absurd, tragic, nihilistic, comic, and more. Which (if any) of these, or some other, seems to you to be the predominant mode? Can you find elements of the others?

Paradoxes of stillness/activity/journeying, sanity/madness, tragedy/comedy, being/non-being and others.

How does Faulkner distinguish different characters by their modes of speech?

"My mother is a fish." The shortest chapter in the book. Some critics have seen Vardaman as developmentally disabled; others think he is simply a child confused by adult events. What do you think, and what is your evidence?

Some of Darl's chapters contain scenes where he is not physically present. How does he know what happens?

Some critics have seen Darl as the sanest of the characters; others see him as psychotic. What do you think, and what is your evidence?

Does Anse love Addie, or his children? Does she love him, or her children? Whom do the children love?

What is the cause of the fire at the barn? What does that reveal about the characters?

The concept of honor.

The differing nature of words and deeds.

Addie's only monologue is one of the key sections of the novel. What does it reveal about her and about the action of the journey?

Why do other characters in the novel help the Bundrens? What is their opinion of them and their journey?

Consider some of the following lines and how they illuminate the novel:

"The reason for living is to get ready to stay dead a long time."

"I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth."

"Now you are aware of me!"

"My mother is a fish."

"I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows that he is, because he does not know whether he knows if he is or not."

"He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me."

"I got just as much respect for the dead as ere a man . . . and a woman that's been dead in a box four day, the best way to respect her is to get her into the ground as quick as you can."

"You, Cash!"

"There is Christians enough to help you."

"That pillow was longer than him."

## **Terms:**

**Stream of consciousness** — A literary mode which attempts to give a sense of the random flow of thoughts and emotions of a character. Grammar, linear chronology and even punctuation may be sacrificed in favor of associations. With roots in some fiction of the later 19th century, it is especially associated with the "modernist" movement in fiction, especially of the 1920's. Notable stream of consciousness writers include Virginia Woolf, James Joyce (especially the Molly Bloom/Penelope section of *Ulysses* and all of *Finnegans Wake*), and Faulkner.



## V. *The Sound and the Fury*

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To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

--William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v

### Topics and themes:

Faulkner's use of stream of consciousness.

See reference materials for a chronology of the first section (Benjy's).

How does Faulkner use language to distinguish the characters?

How does the quote from MacBeth, above, correspond (or not) to the novel?  
Does it, indeed, signify nothing?

Some critics have seen other Shakespearean elements in the novel. What role do they play?

The chronology of events in the first two sections is complex blend of the present and memories. And the sequence of the sections is likewise not linear – April 7, 2008; June 2, 1910; April 6, 1928; and April 8, 1928.  
What would be different about the novel if the sequence was linear?

Since Caddy is the one sibling who does not appear as a narrator, how is she characterized? Think of this in two senses: by what means is she characterized; and what is her character

In what ways is each narrator of the first three sections reliable? In what ways is he unreliable? How do you determine “the truth”?

Most of the actions in Benjy's section revolve around a loss or death; how do these define Benjy and shape the theme of the novel.

What role does Mr. Compson play in the family makeup? Mrs. Compson?

How do the three brothers use time differently?

Significance of the following quotes:

“If I'd just had a mother then I could say Mother Mother”

“Caddy smelled like trees”

“I've seed de first en de last...I seed de beginnin, and now I sees de endin.”



## VI. the Nobel Prize address

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I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work - a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before. So this award is only mine in trust. It will not be difficult to find a dedication for the money part of it commensurate with the purpose and significance of its origin. But I would like to do the same with the acclaim too, by using this moment as a pinnacle from which I might be listened to by the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail, among whom is already that one who will some day stand here where I am standing.

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.

He must learn them again. He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed - love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.

Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

*[William Faulkner's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1950 (for the 1949 award) was slightly revised by the author for republication in **The Faulkner Reader**. As implied in the first paragraph, Faulkner did establish an award fund for young writers, today known as the PEN/Faulkner Awards.]*