

Three Novels of William Faulkner

by William Woodrow



English Association Bookmarks
No. 37

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Scope of Topic

This Bookmark provides an overview of the work of one of the greatest experimental novelists of the century. His enigmatic style provides entrance into a world that is circumscribed and almost claustrophobic. At the same time it provides a metaphor of almost global dimensions. Nobody pretends that William Faulkner is easy to read but possible confusions are often resolved by reading him aloud.

BOOKS TO READ

As I Lay Dying (Vintage Press, 1996)
The Unvanquished (Vintage Press, 1996)
Go Down Moses (Vintage Press, 1996)

NOTES

Think of the Mississippi River. Visualise the continuous current. Imagine the delta with its obscuring suspension of mud and silt. The water is the consistency of weak soup. To float on the surface or to plunge into it haphazardly is to be overwhelmed and almost choked.

But look at it from an aircraft and the impression is different. Sediments are seen to coalesce and become mudbanks or sand bars. Shapes and relationships emerge. Come back another day and what had seemed to be fixed is changed. The solid masses are remoulded and enhanced. The current flows on: it is the life force that governs the entire process.

This is a metaphor for the works of William Faulkner. To approach any of his major works is to plunge into an on-going world. Its style and contents suggest a pre-existence and one ends with the feeling that this (the book) is but a mass moulded by external events and which one inhabits for a while. The world of the book is organic; the characters are in a constant state of change. They come alive and then flicker into obscurity only to emerge much later, older and sometimes wiser.

Book by book the determined reader has no choice. Begin at the beginning, go through the middle until you reach the end. And then stop. Then go back and read it all again. Some of the books will satisfy after only two or three readings. Others, like well loved places and companions, can be visited again and again. The three chosen texts have this effect on me.

As I Lay Dying benefits from experiments with stream of consciousness and internal monologue that Faulkner practised in *The Sound and The Fury* the previous year. In *As I Lay Dying*, experiment for its own sake is done with. We have the authentic voice of an individual who had 'been there, done that, but wasn't prepared to wear the tee-shirt.'

The plot is simple; the narrative structure unique. Events surrounding the death and burial of Addie Bundren are observed through the senses of her immediate family, friends and acquaintances. They are recorded – usually in the present tense – as a sequence of some sixty internal monologues. Most of the book centres upon the adventures of the cortège on the long journey from home to the cemetery of Jefferson, Mississippi, many miles away.

The rather strange expression 'observed through the senses' is more apposite than 'seen through the eyes of', because sounds and the sense of touch are ever present and since the journey as a whole took ten days of heat and humidity, the sense of smell was highly relevant before the end.

About half way through the book, in the 'Samson' episode we get an early example of the way that Faulkner worked. The corpse cart is on its journey and passes a country store just before sundown.

"It's Bundren, from down beyond New Hope," Quick says. "There's one of them Snopes horses Jewel's riding."

"I didn't know there was ere a one of them horses left," MacCallum says. "I thought you folks down there finally contrived to give them all away."

The casual reference to "one of them Snopes horses" is not in itself a particularly momentous statement. It is a throwaway line that the first time reader assumes to be part of local colour - which it is. However, it refers to the notoriously comic 'Spotted Horses' episode from *The Hamlet* - which was not published until 1940. The intervening ten years is too long for this to be a 'chicken and egg' situation. Nevertheless, did Faulkner consciously develop what is effectively a short novel in its own right out of the supposedly throw away line? Or did he have in mind the entire sub-plot of a much later work? I suspect the latter. In fact, I would go further. I suggest that by 1940, in embryo at least, William Faulkner already had the entire body of writing that became the saga of Yoknapatawpha County fully in mind.

The episodes of *As I Lay Dying* seem to be almost haphazard - as if they were written as separate pieces and then loosely shuffled into a seemingly arbitrary order. This first impression could not be more wrong. There is an organic wholeness about the book and being such an early work it is typical of the entire output. Indeed, 'organic' is an apt word. When Faulkner describes, the reader inhabits the description. When he records conversation one is actually taking part in what is being said. Real conversation is not really practical as a literary device. Most 'real conversation' consists of grunts, nods, gestures and a minimum of words. What William Faulkner gives us is what characters would say if they did actually articulate their thoughts. This is a very difficult technique for a writer to master. Possibly the only other writer who comes to mind is James Joyce in his earlier works such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and in *Dubliners* - especially in the story 'The Dead'.

Here are some women talking as they wait for Addie Bundren to die. They discuss a wealthy town lady who has given backward on an order for cakes.

"She ought to taken those cakes anyway," Kate says.

"Well," I say, "I reckon she never had no use for them now."

"She ought to taken them," Kate says. "But those rich town ladies can change their minds. Poor folks can't."

Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart. "Maybe I can sell them at the bazaar Saturday," I say. They turned out real well.

"You can't get two dollars a piece for them," Kate says.

"Well, it isn't like they cost me anything," I say. "I saved them out and swapped a dozen of them for the sugar and flour. It isn't like the cakes cost me anything, as Mr Tull himself realises that the eggs I saved were over and beyond what we had engaged to sell, so it was like we had found the eggs or they had been given to us."

"She ought to taken those cakes when she same as gave you her word," Kate says. The Lord can see into the heart. If it is His will that some folks has different ideas of honesty from other folks, it is not my place to question His decree.

"I reckon she never had any use for them," I say. They turned out real well, too.

This is inconsequential chatter. Its very mundane nature in relation to watching a woman die says a lot about the harshness of life and the phlegmatic nature of the poor whites of the Deep South.

The coffin is made, the corpse laid out and the funeral wagon is made ready for its long trek to Jefferson. Bit by bit the characters emerge from their internal monologues and occasional conversations. All the doubts and uncertainties; the naïvety and worldliness comes across along with the several expressions of trauma that Addie Bundren's death has produced. The individuality of the characters is all the more touching for the enforced but unnatural family unit that Addie Bundren's death creates.

The journey to Jefferson is so intimate and so personal that it exposes the rawness of the relationships. It explores almost all the emotions that humans can hold for each other. So much so that, beneath the simple plot and because of the unique technique and presentation there lies a parable of the entire human condition – going through life towards the grave. But despite this, a hint of humour and therefore of optimism prevails. And to return to our opening metaphor, throughout the entire output it is this optimism and humour that cement the separate elements of the delta.

To change the image, no matter how complex the plots or how experimental the techniques, there remains a vivid impression of what is almost a Hollywood cliché for the Deep South. A group of men sitting or lounging on the verandah of an all purpose store: the whiskey circulates and one of the number talks. The talk goes on and on; ranging through time and space but always coming back to the present in such a way that everything is caught up in the narrative flow. Characters who died fifty years or more earlier identify with the present listeners and time loses its purpose – which is to separate past from present. In Faulkner's case the definition of history (that history is about the past and the past has finished happening) does not apply.

It is therefore not surprising that eight years after *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner should have published *The Unvanquished*. This is another Faulkner 'novel' or collection of long / short stories unified by dealing with events happening to the Sartoris family during and immediately after the American Civil War.

Whenever Faulkner wrote about the Sartoris family he became romantic and lyrical. Despite this he was never sentimental which is something of a surprise when one considers that the chief of the clan was modelled upon his own great-grandfather, Colonel William Faulkner.

The Unvanquished is the easiest of Faulkner's early books in terms of readability. It is direct and conversational and its descriptions are vivid and sensuous.

With total clarity Faulkner takes us into the world of patrician owners, of slaves and the plantation life that they live together. In doing so he reveals the otherwise incomprehensible bonds that held society together. Something of that bond shows in the 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 of

recompense and to my childhood
an immeasurable devotion
and love.

Faulkner was often unpopular in the South for his unequivocal support of coloured people. In most cases he simply showed that there was a natural equilibrium until the intrusion of the Yankee armies followed by the self-seeking carpet-baggers. This created hatred and conflict, mutual distrust and lack of unity. It replaced a community that previously had existed after the pattern of the clan system in 18th century Scotland before Culloden.

For the most part his style is personal and his manner intimate. His characters are partisan; he remains aloof. We are shown a close-knit family and their retainers. He provides them with words and situations. Their responses are highly individual on the one hand and universal on the other.

For this reason *The Unvanquished* is not simply another Civil War novel, extolling the virtues of the 'Old Times' and contrasting them with the post-Civil War conditions of extortion, exploitation and the policies of black and white.

There is a delightful sequence in the first episode, 'Ambuscade'. Bayard Sartoris – son of an old patrician family - and his companion Ringo – son of a slave – play 'Civil Wars'. They use wood chips for army divisions moving and siting them on bare earth.

Later in the story the boys mistakenly believe they have killed a Yankee soldier. They run away and shelter beneath the voluminous skirts of Granny, who is the archetypal Southern Belle become Grande Dame. Her interview with the officer in charge of the platoon is a dialogue of double bluff and irony. By implicit and oblique references and allusions we are made aware of the kindness and courtesy of the Northern soldier and the very essence of the intractable, proud and puritanical southern aristocrat.

It is the same kind of irony that one finds in Shakespeare. Characters say one thing, and imply another to hidden listener and audience alike. *The Unvanquished* is an organic book. It is impossible to do justice either to style or story by short quotations. The book is best described in musical terms: it is contrapuntal.

Counterpoint also plays a considerable part in our third selection: *Go Down Moses*. The basic theme that holds together the seven episodes is the connection between the white and black descendants of old Carothers McCaslin, and the profound belief of Isaac McCaslin (the narrator of much of the book) that the very land itself was cursed by slavery. To continue the musical metaphor, he is the ground bass of the work. His presence, his thoughts and the world seen through his eyes all make the South alive and vibrant.

If I were backpacking and limited to just one book, it would probably be *Go Down Moses*. In both style and substance it is the essential Faulkner. The episodes are good stories in themselves but would not provide models for the aspiring short story writer. The most anthologised of all Faulkner's stories, 'The Bear', is the centre-piece of the entire book – but with a difference. The complex section four, some 50 pages long in the paperback edition, is omitted from the magazine versions of the story.

The shortened version – approved by Faulkner himself was the form in which 'The Bear' appeared in his collection *Big Woods* dated 1955. In this form it is arguably the finest example of a hunting story in the English language. In its extended form in *Go Down Moses* the intrusive section four may be left out. But if one is to understand the underlying theme of the book; indeed the underlying theme of all Faulkner's work, it has to be read. It is stylish, complex in structure and contains the second longest sentence that I can think of in all English Literature. The longest being in 'The Jail' (also by Faulkner some nine years later).

The reader has to work in order to fit subject to verb and relate a particular person to a specific thought or deed.

If one perseveres, then looking back the effort is worth it. On the other hand, the story is more comprehensible without it. I have to say that without this section the story is readable and enjoyable. With it included the reader more easily inhabits Faulkner's world overall.

When *Go Down Moses* first comes to hand it is hard not to turn instantly to the beginning of 'The Bear' and read it, then put down the book and assume that that is it. Its power and persuasiveness tend to give the impression that other episodes are either forewords, prologues or epilogues to the real action. It is totally wrong to do this. Faulkner presented *Go Down Moses* as a novel; not a collection of short stories. And it is as a novel that it must be read.

Every episode of *Go Down Moses* has its place and its part to play in the narrative. Some are filled with humour – the rustic humour of Mark Twain or, in England, of R.S. Surtees. Others have a gothic sense of menace and foreboding. 'Delta Autumn' is a bittersweet blend of nostalgia and anger. It is the anger of a man frustrated within a system he is powerless to change.

And the title episode, 'Go Down Moses', introduces us to Gavin Stevens – one of Faulkner's most endearing and enduring characters. It provides the authentic dilemma of black and white in the South and North alike. It is the length of a magazine short story but it encapsulates all the history, legend and ambiguity of America's Old South. It also provides a microcosm of all that William Faulkner wrote and believed in.

FURTHER READING

The Portable Faulkner, edited by Malcolm Cowley (Viking, 1967)
The Address upon receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950 is included.

As many of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels as are still available. Especially *The Sound and the Fury**; *Sanctuary**; *Light in August**; *Absalom, Absalom**; *The Hamlet*; *Intruder in the Dust**; *The Town*; *The Mansion*.

* All published in Penguin Books. All Vintage.

The Collected Short Stories (Vintage, 1995)

Criticism

The best and most accessible criticism has been mentioned already. It is Malcom Cowley's Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*.

Much Faulkner criticism has appeared in journals and reviews, especially in the U.S. and is not readily available.

Two books that are available from most libraries are:-

William Faulkner - The Critical Heritage by John Bassett. (Routledge, 1975) ISBN 0710081243

William Faulkner by Eric Mottram. (In the Profiles in Literature series) (Routledge, 1971) ISBN 0171006988X

Three Novels of William Faulkner by William Woodrow is Number 37 in the Bookmark series, published by

The English Association
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982
Fax: 0116 252 2301
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor
Victor Hext

Shakespeare Bookmarks
Kerri Corcoran-Martin

Primary Bookmarks
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Secondary Bookmarks
Ian Brinton