

William Faulkner: A Man and a Writer

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ABSTRACT: *William Faulkner (1897-1962) is one of the most formidable 20th century American Writers. He is a novelist of a great stature and is known exclusively for his narrative technique for which he has been hailed as an innovator par excellence. He uses the stream of consciousness technique in his novels. Faulkner is also an American Historian as much as he is a considered a Novelist. Although being a Novelist, it has earned him the distinction of becoming the first American Novelist to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Faulkner, a modern novelist is known for recording the American South History. His novels and Short Stories are embedded with themes that reflect the important issues such as the Civil War, Slavery and Class Conflicts, which brought the world's attention to American doors. This paper traces the beginning stages of Faulkner's writing and parleys on one of the important novels that he had penned during his career in writing.*

KEYWORDS: William Faulkner, America, Novel and History.

INTRODUCTION

A writer who lived amidst two World Wars that ravaged Europe and the World at large applied for the position as a fighter pilot in the US army. *Soldiers Pay*, his first novel released in 1926 was published at a time when America was moving towards the Depression Period (1930).

Between 1926 and 1961, Faulkner penned 19 novels in about 35 years. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950 for his "powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel". He never compromised on striking a chord towards creating a balanced view in his novels.

In the 1930's the American economy fell into shambles due to the financial crisis yielding in the decadence of the society ravaged by steep rise in debts and low productivity in plantation estates across the American South. Faulkner as a simple individual looked at it with minute details and through his novels presented it to the world with an extra ordinary sense of perception.

The Depression Period (1930's) and The Beat Moment (1940's) was at the forefront shaping the lives of millions of Americans. The former deals with the financial crisis that America had faced and the latter portrays much ridicule that appeared to be mocking at the Depression

Period. It is by definition a transition phase from one to another. And many of the famous novels penned by Faulkner appear at that time.

Growing up as a Writer

Faulkner was employed in a bank in Oxford and began to write. He was primarily influenced with poetic excellence of John Keats and Scott Fitzgerald. His stream of consciousness novel *The Sound and the Fury* was published in the year 1929 and was ranked 6th on the Modern Library on the hundred best English Language novel of the 20th century.

He was bright in his childhood and as early as when he was seven years old, he began to gather interest toward the history of Mississippi with respect to Civil War. His interests towards literature were no exception. Guided by his mother in his early days of schooling, Faulkner extensively read the works of William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

In one of the interviews, Faulkner himself admitted that the influence that he garnered from reading *The Bible* and the *Greek Tragedies* enabled him to earn his distinctive writing style. And therefore his novels do contain significant biblical references and some characteristics drawn from Greek tragedy. He is also has being hailed as American Shakespeare by many of his great critics.

He developed an innate taste for poetry in teenage. He was greatly influenced with the works of John Donne and as result we also find metaphysical references stipulated in his novels. Faulkner began spending much of his time in the vicinity of University of Mississippi at Oxford and thereby willingly involved himself in discussions that helped him shape up his interests towards writing.

Growing up a child and moving on to become an adult was not a smooth transition for Faulkner. He spent a significant amount of time as a loner due to the many family issues that haunted him. But Faulkner quickly grew out of it during his stay at the Mississippi University by befriending Ben Wasson, Phil Stone and Estelle Oldham who were also his friends for socializing.

Phil Stone and Faulkner were intellectual friends and together they had digested the many facets of Literature. Having been influenced by Faulkner's poetry, Phil began to appreciate his works. Phil being a senior at the University adored Faulkner's love for poetry and committed himself towards sponsoring the education of Faulkner.

The presence of Estelle Oldham around Faulkner played a crucial role during their days at the University. Faulkner began developing romantic feelings towards Estelle like any other ordinary youth growing up at the time and chose to share that commitment through his rendition of poetry. Estelle received a considerable amount of romantic poems penned by Faulkner.

Soldier's Pay: His first Novel

In June 1922, at the age of about 25 Faulkner's *Portrait* a poem was published in *Double Dealer* a magazine that had reputation at the time. Faulkner's poems published and unpublished at the time were imitative.

The poems enabled him to become more self-educated. This aspect made him stronger as a poet and as an individual self who wished to make a dent in the universe much like any other young and ambitious colleagues of his times. He was successful in early part of his life to gather the attention of the local readers in a small way.

Faulkner feared that he would not be able to build talent if his sole intentions were construed towards commercializing his writing. He began to divert his attention towards penning novels. He wanted to explore themes that affect his immediate vicinity, record his thoughts and therefore reach a wider audience. Initially, Faulkner's wish was to lay emphasis on a single theme that affected the society, community, American South, America and the world at large.

Faulkner narrowed down on war as a theme, which will later be constituted and adapted itself into a full-fledged novel. Faulkner's initial thought was to focus on returning war veterans. And hence, he sought professional advice and help from Anderson on composing a novel. In 1925, with the mentorship of Anderson, he began to write his first novel *Soldier's Pay*.

His first novel was more on an autobiographical note. Faulkner wanted to culminate complete information about the accurate rendition of the human conditions. And hence this aspect enabled him to pay close attention to details of the protagonist who later was positioned as the central character in the novel.

Soldier's Pay is the first novel published by Faulkner in 1926 spanning a record time of one year.

With the lack of Internet technology at the time, Faulkner in his early days of writing career had to wander between his hometown and places of importance in order to either gain inspiration or collect facts. These travels enabled him to record notes and thereafter work on prominent themes towards publishing novels.

Faulkner had a unique way of preparing his manuscripts. Since the early days of his writing, he began to write by hand followed by rework on the manuscripts. He began to provide an extensive review of literature to his first novel. He wrote a short introduction on war and literature at the beginning of the novel. He wrote it inviting readers to get accustomed to the present circumstances that surround on the serious theme of war that he laid his complete emphasis upon.

Inspiration for Writing

For writers across the globe gaining inspiration was part of their lives however small or big it turned out to be. And Faulkner was no exception to this effect. He travelled extensively and visited places of literary importance. In 1927, Faulkner travelled to Europe. He visited the tomb of Oscar Wilde in Paris. He spent a significant amount of time at Kent in England and visited the coffee houses frequented by Christopher Marlowe and Charles Dickens.

Faulkner's Stream of Consciousness technique was an inspiration that he imbibed from the writings of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1923) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). His novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) with the technique of the stream of consciousness incorporated in it is being considered a mastered piece. The novel holds significance because of its four different narrative voices.

Nobel Prize winning author Faulkner is also credited with having won not just one but two Pulitzer prizes one of which he won it posthumously. During the course of his writing career spanning about 37 years between 1925 and 1962 Faulkner has published 19 novels, 3 short stories, 3 poetry books and a play –novel.

His first novel *Soldier's Pay* published in 1925 is about a returning war veteran set in the year 1919, a year after the First World War. Interesting to note that Faulkner was made an honorary second lieutenant in the year 1919. Faulkner recorded his experiences, merits and demerits of the war in the novel. In the novel, he recounts his past experiences with the army and projects the horrific experiences he had to encounter. It is a dramatic novel with an autobiographical element.

Best Novel

The Sound and the Fury (1929) by far is being considered the best novel penned by Faulkner in his writing career spanning 37 years. In many ways, the novel is considered experimental. Faulkner successfully employs the stream of consciousness technique in the novel.

In Faulkner's own admission about the novel, he reveals 'I must judge it on the basis that one which caused me the most grief and anguish, as the mother loves the child who became the thief or murderer more than the one who became the priest'.

Jean-Paul Sartre in his article 'On *The Sound and the Fury* Time in the Work of Faulkner' comments, "Everything we see and experience impels us to say, "This can't last." And yet change is not even conceivable, except in the form of a cataclysm. We are living in a time of impossible revolutions, and Faulkner uses his extraordinary art to describe our suffocation and a world dying of old age."

Sartre's critical commentary on Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* helped garner great reputation for Faulkner as a writer. His ideas were largely incorporated for an audience of the 20th century. But what makes the ideas relevant in the 21st century is strikingly important. With America currently facing racist issues, it is important to go back to this novel to collate answers into solving those issues.

Faulkner's Narrative Technique

Influenced by James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1923), Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915 – 1938) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Faulkner employs the stream-of-consciousness technique in his novels. Some Major critics define it "Interior Monologue" The potential to explore the techniques employed largely arrives in the detailed compartmentalization of Faulkner's style.

His brilliant narrative style is often challenging to interpret as he gives his characters equal turns to reiterate their bone of contention in a given space. The central truth in the novel revolves around them irrespective of their place and time they belong. This mastery of technique leaves the readers attached to the novel and its brilliance attaches greater values.

According to Joseph W. Reed Jr, The narrative styles of Faulkner could be characterized as “powerful and bold interactions”:

1. Between characters
2. Between characters and narrator
3. Between characters, narrator, and reader.

CONCLUSION

Faulkner is known to have created many imaginary places such as the Yoknapatawpha County in his novels. And what makes him regarded as one of the most prolific writers in the 20th century lies in his quality of paying close attention to details. He renders the exact nature of human conditions and places them in his own physical setting.

His Novels *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom Absalom* (1936) are among the best novels of the 20th century. The novels represent rich collection of stories penned by Faulkner retold using his characters, established in his own setting and presented with the accurate rendition of human condition.

Faulkner has always been praised for his originality with respect to the themes embedded in his novels. The significant effect created by him in the 20th century American writing has been rippling and exists as an international phenomenon in the 21st century. These aspects make him one of the most formidable writers of all time both at American doors and at the global stage.

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