

Tradition and Narrative: William Faulkner within the Southern Literary Imagination

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Abstract

This paper examines William Faulkner's position within the Southern literary imagination, emphasizing his unique negotiation of tradition, history, and narrative form. Southern literature, shaped by a deep consciousness of place and a persistent engagement with the past, finds in Faulkner its most complex and enduring expression. Unlike writers who merely record Southern customs or regional detail, Faulkner transforms history into a living moral and psychological force. Through the creation of the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, he reconstructs the South as an imaginative landscape where memory, guilt, race, and decay interact across generations. Like Jane Austen's use of a limited social world to reveal universal human concerns, Faulkner's localized setting achieves profound symbolic depth. His narratives demonstrate how the past survives as a determining presence rather than a closed record, reinforcing Robert Penn Warren's idea of history as a "condition of life." Thus, Faulkner emerges as a central figure who reshapes Southern tradition into a modernist exploration of identity, time, and moral responsibility.

Keywords: Southern Literary Imagination; Tradition; History and Memory; Yoknapatawpha County; Regionalism; Southern Identity; Modernism; Narrative Technique; Moral Landscape

American literature has always been influenced by its regional traditions and Southern literature too is strongly shaped by its history, culture, and social practices. In the twentieth century, Southern literature emerged as a distinctive voice within American letters, marked by

its preoccupation with social practices, culture, and search for identity. The Southern imagination developed a unique way of reflecting on itself, and many writers like Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Carolyn Gordon, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor and important of all, William Faulkner dealt with the problem of the definition of the South.

In the fiction and poetry of these writers, a voice emerged with a distinct meaning for the history and culture of the South. A key trait of the Southern writer is the desire to protect and portray the way of life he knows. This gave rise to the idea of a close community of Southern writers connected by memory and a shared past. As Robert Penn Warren says, "History for the Southerner is not a chronological record but a condition of life," (Warren) meaning that the past is something they continue to live with, not just something that happened long ago.

The literature of the South can be broadly categorized into three parts: The first deals with the tradition without abstracting it, as in the works of Caroline Gordon, Ellen Glasgow. The second type reveals the exact native particulars of a scene and communicating its existence in time, as in the works of Eudora Welty, McCullers and Flannery O' Connor. And the third type explores the complex inward influence of place as moral fable, serving a decisive role in the novel's substantial meaning, as in William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren.

Faulkner's deep attachment to the place of his origin, makes him develop the particular fictional area like 'Yoknapatawpha Country.' Like Jane Austin, he does more than portraying a provincial society and is ultimately concerned with the values on which the civilized order is based. His keen insight shows that man is never free from innocence or guilt, and the existence of the one presumes the existence of the other. Cleanth Brooks says that, "Faulkner's invention of 'Yoknapatawpha County' provided him with a social context in

which what was healthiest in his romanticism could live in fruitful tension with his realistic and detailed knowledge of the men and manners of his own land.”(Brooks)

Faulkner possessed a clear awareness of his own artistic talent as well as a deep understanding of how the Southern literary tradition connects to the broader current of American literature. His vision of life was deeply shaped and sustained by the culture and experience of the South. His statement in an interview on his connection to the south... “I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it. By sublimating the actual into the apocryphal, I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top.” (Faulkner) Faulkner was reflecting on how he came to focus on his fictional ‘Yoknapatawpha County,’ which he based on his native Lafayette County, Mississippi.

For William Faulkner, the mystery of human existence reveals a spiritual world that is just as real as the physical one. He believed that a writer must have a deep connection to his own region, because leaving it would risk losing the balance between principle and reality, judgment and observation, a balance that makes fiction believable. In Faulkner’s works, unlike those of other Southern writers, the central idea is that human perverseness that often leads to violence and suffering, but through this violence comes a kind of emotional release or catharsis which helps to uncover deeper truths about life.

Faulkner’s vision is unique in its focus on the darker aspects of the human soul, much like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. He believes that confronting this darkness allows humans to recognize reality. This reality in turn reveals human limitations and inadequacies within the larger framework of life. During Faulkner’s time, the American South was deeply rooted in traditional Christian values, which shaped its culture and social norms. Faulkner’s fiction

often explores these values, particularly themes of sin, guilt, and redemption. In novels like “Absalom, Absalom!”, “The Sound and the Fury”, he portrays the fall of Southern aristocratic family, symbolized by decaying mansions and the mental deterioration of their members. Through these depictions, Faulkner reveals the moral corruption hidden beneath the polished surface of Southern gentility.

The southern Gothic literary tradition is unlike the British tradition where horror elements are mainly to do with the supernatural like in Bram Stoker’s Dracula and Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein etc. But in the Southern Gothic tradition, the Gothic is embedded in its practice of slavery. Civil war and the burden of history. The South for Faulkner and other writers is haunted region because it is built on slavery, violence and the fall. Faulkner’s characters are haunted not by supernatural but by the burden of history. Major characters in Faulkner’s narratives are fragmented and always try to comprehend or escape the burden of southern history. The families in his fiction, the Sartorises, Compsons, McCaslins and the Sutpens fall from their aristocratic planter class, and suffer from the decline of the economic, social, religious order, that the civil war brought.

In his book “Love and Death in American Novel”, Leslie Fiedler says that there are interesting connections between the American novel and America. According to him, “The writer in America stood lonely in his society, as lonely as in any virgin forest. The great writers who have written on loneliness and terror have failed to imagine the natural love between man and woman, which has been the central theme of most of the European novels in contemporary times”. (Fiedler)

Fiedler argues that classic American literature often revolves around themes of escape, violence, death, and decay. Faulkner's novels, such as "Absalom, Absalom!" and "The Sound and the Fury", exemplify this through recurring tropes like incest, repression, guilt, and the decline of the Southern aristocracy. Fiedler's assertion that "the American novel is not concerned with manners but with monstrosities" is clearly illustrated in Faulkner's Southern Gothic fiction. His characters are rarely guided by ideals of permanent union or happy married life; instead, they remain isolated, engage in incest and violence, and ultimately meet tragic ends. This confirms Fiedler's view that in American literature, and especially in Faulkner's work, love is intertwined with death, and the Gothic represents deeper truths about human existence.

Faulkner uses Southern Gothic elements in his fiction to show the moral decay of the South. The decline of plantations and the mansions of white aristocratic families reflects the darker side of human nature. Haunted houses, lonely characters with obsessions and prejudices, and the brooding Southern landscape, all challenge the glorified view of the South and reveal the harsh realities of its history and society. With its unique historical, cultural, and thematic elements, the Southern literary tradition remains distinct within American literature. As Cleanth Brooks observes, "Faulkner's 'Yoknapatawpha County' is far more than a microcosm of the South; it is a world of moral and spiritual conflict in which the Southern experience becomes symbolic of the human condition. His vision of the South is not a nostalgic return to a lost cause, but a tragic awareness of man's involvement in time, history, and guilt. The strength of Faulkner's art lies in his ability to see beyond sectionalism to the universality of human suffering and endurance." (Brooks)

“Absalom, Absalom!” is a prime example of Southern Gothic fiction. Its protagonist, Thomas Sutpen, embodies both heroism and villainy, representing a distorted version of the American Dream. Sutpen’s story is first narrated by Miss Rosa, and later recounted by Quentin to his Canadian Harvard roommate, who asks him to describe life in the South. The novel chronicles the multi-generational doom of the Sutpen family.

Thomas Sutpen’s ambition is evident from his childhood, when he is turned away from a plantation’s front door because he is considered “white trash.” From that moment he resolves to build his own plantation and father a white male heir. His marriage to Ellen, the daughter of the town’s clergy, is a calculated act of social climbing, a step toward achieving his desired position in the Southern social hierarchy. As Ceanth Brooks notes, “Thomas Sutpen, a man of genius, but without moral conscience, had come into Jefferson with a plan, a design to establish a dynasty, to conquer his world, and to make his mark upon the South.” (Brooks)

Sutpen’s children, Henry and Judith, inherit the psychological burden of their father’s ambitions. They are raised within a myth of Southern purity, which ultimately unravels, exposing the falsity beneath the family’s veneer. Sutpen’s abandoned son, Charles Bon, comes to the plantation and begins an affair with his half-sister Judith. When it is revealed that Charles is Henry’s half-brother and of mixed race, Henry murders him. In this regard, Barbara Ladd notes that in another Faulkner work, “The Bear”, the character Isaac McCaslin discovers a dark family secret, that his grandfather had an incestuous relationship with his enslaved daughter. To escape the burden of this guilt, Isaac renounces his inheritance and chooses a simple, detached life. In contrast to this, in “Absalom, Absalom!”, Quentin confronts the weight of Southern history through self-sacrifice. Ladd further observes that unlike Faulkner, Eudora Welty (another prominent Southern writer) portrays characters who

are largely free from the burden of historical guilt. Her characters focus on their immediate concerns, confined to a narrow span of time, rather than grappling with the broader moral and historical legacy of the South.

Faulkner presents the narrative as the literal embodiment of the repressed past. Charles Bon represents the Sutpen's false dream. After Sutpen returns from the civil war, he once again starts to rebuild his empire. In an obsessive attempt to fulfil his design, he marries young Milly, the daughter of a poor white servant, Wash Jones. And later, when Sutpen finds out that Milly gave birth to a baby girl, he rejects Milly and his daughter. His rejection of his own daughter and wife, combined with his relentless pursuit of a male heir, ultimately leads to his death at the hands of Wash Jones.

The decay and eventual doom of Sutpen's plantation in "Absalom, Absalom"! can be understood both literally and metaphorically. Literally, the physical deterioration of the mansion and the surrounding estate reflects the collapse of the Sutpen family and the decline of the Southern aristocracy. Metaphorically, the fall of the plantation represents the entire Southern social and moral order, a system built on the exploitation of enslaved African Americans and sustained by rigid notions of racial purity and inherited privilege. The myths of grandeur, honour, and racial superiority that Sutpen tries to uphold are gradually exposed as hollow and unsustainable. Faulkner demonstrates that the South's dynasties, which rely on oppression, violence, and the denial of human dignity, are destined to crumble. The destruction of the plantation thus symbolizes the end of an entire historical and cultural legacy. Through this intertwining of the personal and the historical, Faulkner portrays the South not merely as a region, but as a site of moral and psychological reckoning, where the

illusions of power and purity inevitably meet the realities of human suffering and historical consequence.

The structure of “Absalom, Absalom!” with its repeated storytelling, different narrators, and non-linear timeline shows how the past keeps coming back to affect the present. The fragmented way the story is told reflects the broken reality of the South, where myths about wealth, racial purity, and social status hide deep moral and historical problems. For Faulkner, the past is not just history; it is a force that shapes the lives and choices of his characters. The novel shows how lies, family secrets, and inherited sins haunt generations. This makes it a clear example of Southern Gothic, where the South is portrayed as a haunted, decaying region full of violence, isolation, and psychological tension. In Faulkner’s work, the Gothic is not about ghosts or the supernatural, but about the moral failures of Southern society. Mansions fall into decay, families are broken, and characters struggle with guilt and obsession. All this shows that the South’s society built on slavery, oppression, and rigid social rules, creates a world that constantly reminds its people of the consequences of the past. “Absalom, Absalom!” uses these Gothic elements to reveal the darker truths about the South and its history, making it one of the best examples of Southern Gothic literature. Irving Howe says that, “In Absalom, Absalom!” the Southern world achieves its fullest expression, a world of rigid codes and impossible dreams, of racial fear and ancestral guilt. The Sutpen saga, told and retold, becomes the collective memory of a civilization that cannot escape its own story, and in the telling, Faulkner exposes the moral and emotional contradictions of the South more completely than any historian could.” (Howe)

The second novel for my study in this paper is “The Sound and the Fury”. Faulkner uses a stream-of-consciousness narrative in this novel to give readers a deep and immersive look into the culture and life of the American South. The novel follows the Compson family as they fall into decline, and through their story, Faulkner shows the moral weaknesses, personal failings, and social contradictions of Southern society. The characters struggle with pride, tradition, and their own limitations, reflecting the pressures and contradictions of the world around them. Faulkner by examining the myths of Southern nobility and grandeur, shows that beneath the surface of wealth, status, and old family reputations lies fragility, decay, and ethical failure. By focusing on the inner thoughts and memories of the characters in “The Sound and the Fury”, Faulkner captures how the past continually influences the present and shapes human behaviour. The Compson family’s decline becomes a symbol for the broader decline of the Southern aristocracy after the Civil War, highlighting the instability and moral ambiguity of Southern life. Through this approach, Faulkner not only tells the story of a single family but also explores the cultural and historical forces that define the South, revealing a region haunted by its past. In “The Achievement of William Faulkner”, Michael Millgate says that “In The Sound and the Fury”, Faulkner achieves not merely the story of one family’s ruin, but the symbolic history of the Old South itself. The novel’s complex structure, its multiple narrations and contradictory voices, mirror the fragmented consciousness of a people haunted by their own history. Faulkner’s innovative narrative techniques reflect the complexities and contradictions inherent in the Southern experience, presenting a multifaceted view of a society in decline.” (Michael)

The Compsons are an aristocratic family in the town who were once wealthy and influential. But in the post-Civil War South, they have fallen into financial, social, and psychological decline. They are unable to adapt to the new social rules and their failure

mirrors the fall of the Old South. Mr. Compson, the patriarch in the novel, represents the psychological burden of the Southern past. He struggles with ideas of time, honour, and human weakness, unable to accept the collapse of the old Southern order after the emancipation of Black people. This conflict causes him deep psychological suffering. Other family members, Quentin and Jason see the family's decline as a stain on both their family and Southern honour. The Compsons' estate itself symbolizes decay, reflecting the degeneration of the Southern aristocracy. Caddy Compson's moral choices, particularly her loss of virginity, are seen as the trigger for the family's fall and the other characters respond to it as the collapse of the noble Southern order. In the novel Benjy is mentally disabled and experiences time in a non-linear way, remembering events like Caddy's pregnancy and expulsion out of order. Quentin is unable to cope with Caddy's loss of innocence, which to him symbolizes the fall of Southern nobility.

In "The Sound and the Fury", the only character who embodies sanity, moral strength, and endurance is Dilsey, the elderly Black servant who has remained with the Compson family for many years. While the Compsons descend into moral and psychological collapse, it is Dilsey who maintains the household and upholds its daily functioning through her quiet resilience and spiritual clarity. She is the anchor amidst the family's chaos, demonstrating loyalty, patience, and an unwavering sense of right and wrong. Dilsey's presence highlights the contrast between the Compsons' moral failure and the steadfastness of those who remain outside the aristocratic traditions. By the end of the novel, her endurance emphasizes the deep human longing for the lost order, both at the family level and the broader social world, suggesting that even amidst decay and disorder, moral clarity and strength persist.

The Compson's family's dysfunction and decline are symbolic of the moral, social, and psychological collapse that occurred in Southern aristocratic family after the Civil War. The family is not only broken by its own flaws but is also weighed down by outdated codes of honour, social expectations, and racial hierarchies that no longer function in the changing world. Benjy, with his mental disability represents stunted growth and voiceless suffering, the pure, unmediated consciousness trapped in a decaying world. Quentin is consumed by the old ideals of Southern nobility and honour, and this obsession ultimately leads him to emotional ruin. Jason, in contrast, grotesquely embodies the rise of capitalist values that replace love, memory, and human connection with greed, control, and material gain. Through these characters, Faulkner shows how the collapse of the family mirrors the collapse of the Southern social order, and he uses Gothic elements - decay, psychological tension, and obsession - to create a setting that reflects both personal and societal collapse.

The ruined Compson family mansion is a powerful symbol of the fall of the Old South. Once a palace of order, dominance, and social authority, it now stands as a physical and symbolic site of madness, selfishness, and decline. Its decayed halls and crumbling walls reflect the psychological and moral degeneration of the family, as well as the breakdown of the aristocratic social structures that once governed Southern life. Through the depiction of the mansion and its ruined state, Faulkner creates a quintessential Southern Gothic setting: a landscape haunted by the past, shaped by the weight of tradition, and marked by human flaws. The mansion, like the family it houses, becomes a space where the past continues to exert control, where memories of lost power and prestige linger, and where the collapse of the Southern order is made tangible. This intertwining of the physical and moral landscape allows Faulkner to explore the consequences of social and familial decay while presenting a deeply Gothic vision of the South, a region both beautiful and terrifying, noble and corrupt,

enduring yet haunted by its own history. Malcolm Cowley says that “Faulkner made of his little postage stamp of native soil an entire cosmos; the familiar landmarks - the courthouse, the river, the decaying mansion, the cabins of the poor whites and the Negro quarters - all became symbols in a tragic drama of man’s struggle against time, against his own passions, and against the guilt inherited from his ancestors. In ‘Yoknapatawpha County’, Faulkner created not merely a picture of the South, but a myth of human existence itself.” (Cowley)

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