William Faulkner (1897-1962)
a biographical sketch by John Lowe, Louisiana State University

William Cuthbert Faulkner was born September 24 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi. The family soon moved to nearby Oxford, where Faulkner would spend most of his life; although small and isolated, the town was the site of the University of Mississippi. Young William unsurprisingly looked back to his great-grandfather Colonel William Clark Falkner for a role model; this ancestor, a Civil War hero, had also been a popular writer, a local political leader, and a railroad pioneer. Young Bill was instilled with these family legends by his elderly aunts. The Old Colonel had been a violent man who had walked all the way to frontier Mississippi from Tennessee in the early nineteenth century. Never shy of any type of conflict, he survived several fights and duels, but was eventually shot down in the street by an angry former business associate. His two popular novels, some martial poetry, and a play, provided a literary legacy for his namesake. Still, young William eventually changed the spelling of his last name in an effort to assert his individuality and independence.

Bill, as he was known then, spent long hours in his grandfather's impressive library, but school bored him. He preferred hunting, girls, talk about airplanes and football. Faulkner dropped out of high school, and drifted from one odd job to another. Soon he acquired a local nickname, "Count 'No Count'", which didn't help his courtship of Estelle Oldham, the daughter of a judge. His own family suggested that he would never be able to support a wife. When Estelle married the dashing and successful Cornell Franklin in 1918, Faulkner ran off to New Haven to live with his old Oxford pal Phil Stone, who was enrolled at Yale. Faulkner got a job at a munitions factory, but also maintained a rigorous reading program of old and new literary classics under Stone's direction. He was especially influenced by Swinburne, the decadent French poets, and Balzac. His appreciation of T. S. Eliot's use of myth was partly due to his own profound knowledge of the Bible. The new texts linked up with old favourites, such as Melville, Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, and Conrad.

Faulkner, like many romantic aspiring writers, was electrified by the chance of heroic combat in World War I. After several futile attempts to enlist, he joined the Royal Air Force of Canada. However, his five months of pilot training in Toronto ended with the Armistice. With military aspirations thwarted, he attempted to excel as an artist. As a child he had learned to draw from his talented grandmother and mother, so, as a special student at the University of Mississippi, he provided illustrations for several campus publications. Ultimately, however, bored, despondent over losing not only Estelle (now living in China), but other loves too, Faulkner left the University in 1921. Returning East, he worked briefly in a New York bookstore. In December a homesick Faulkner accepted a position as postmaster at Ole Miss. Despite a woeful performance, he hung on to the job until 1924, which enabled him to complete his first book of poetry, *The Marble Faun* (1924), a decadent / neo-romantic collection that nevertheless contained inklings of future genius.

His friendship with Elizabeth Prall led to an apprenticeship with her husband Sherwood Anderson when Faulkner moved to New Orleans in 1925. Friends acquainted him with Freud, the mythic world of the anthropologist Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and most importantly, the modernist innovations of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. Faulkner's absorbed interest in experimental writing proceeded apace; building on his brief published pieces in local venues, he began a novel, ***Soldier's Pay***, which portrayed the tragic homecoming of a fatally wounded war hero. Anderson, who had promised Faulkner he would get the book in print if he didn't have to read it, came through, and the novel was published in 1926.

To celebrate, Faulkner scraped some money together and sailed to Europe. Travelling on the cheap, sometimes by foot, he visited Italy and England, but felt a stronger affinity for France. His sojourn there led to a life-long Francophilia that embraced a love of French literature and food. Faulkner kept writing in Europe and, upon his return to Mississippi, another series of odd jobs enabled him to continue working on his second novel, ***Mosquitoes*** (1927). All of these early works provide a rather negative view of women, who often appear as flappers, floozies, and heartbreakers, perhaps because of Estelle's "betrayal" and Faulkner's subsequent rejection by a second love, Helen Baird. In 1928 Estelle divorced her husband and returned to Oxford with her two children; everyone now expected Faulkner to marry her. Although his love had cooled, he did, and the marriage soon took a permanently rocky turn, as the partners drifted into quarrels, alcoholism and, ultimately, largely separate lives. Still, the marriage seemed to give Faulkner some degree of

balance and purpose, for the next year, 1929, was the start of his most productive period (extending to 1942), during which he wrote seven masterpieces. The impetus for this unparalleled achievement came in ***Sartoris*** (1929) in which Faulkner, taking Anderson's advice, focussed on what he termed his "little postage-stamp of soil", **Yoknapatawpha County**; all of his greatest stories take place there, in or around Jefferson, the county seat. The fictional town and county clearly depict hometown Oxford and Lafayette County. This forceful concentration permitted Faulkner to orchestrate a mythic "cosmos" of his own. Ultimately, he ranged widely through his state's history, incorporating the frontier days, the Civil War, and contemporary events, sometimes all in the same novel. Many stories rendered the experience of women, blacks, and Indians as well, and showed a poignant nostalgia for lost rituals and traditions and the vanishing wilderness while simultaneously denouncing reckless industrialization, consumer culture and racial injustice.

Sartoris served as an impressive preamble to Faulkner's first masterwork, published that same year, ***The Sound and the Fury***. Depressed by the failure of his books to sell, Faulkner decided to experiment, beginning with a complicated portrait of a little girl in muddy drawers climbing a pear tree to peer in the parlour window at her grandmother's corpse; this tableau created a compelling metaphor for the tale of a proud Southern family's decline, but also of the end of innocence everywhere present in the modern era. Faulkner told his tale in successive first person narrations by three brothers; shockingly, the first is told by an "idiot", and does indeed seem to "signify nothing", but as each successive telling unfolds the reader, forced to create meaning, participates in the construction of the novel. The concluding fourth section, which is rendered through the consciousness of the brothers' black housekeeper, brings closure to the circular tale through a crescendo of ironic spiritual symbolism. Although critics perceived it as a crucial breakthrough in literary modernism, the book sold poorly, as did Faulkner's next work, ***As I Lay Dying*** (1930), which shifts focus to the travails of a poor white family, as they attempt to bury their unembalmed mother forty miles from homeEver experimental, and expanding the technique of multiple narration, Faulkner employs fifty-nine first person narrations by fifteen characters.

As the thirties opened, Faulkner, desperate for money, purposely wrote a lurid potboiler, ***Sanctuary*** (1931). Faulkner still struggled financially; he had difficulty placing the many short stories he wrote to make money during this period as well. When he was asked to come to Hollywood to work on scripts, he had little choice. Faulkner's several Hollywood gigs (1932-36; 1942-45; parts of l951 and l954) were, for him, virtual slavery, and led to increasing drunkenness. Faulkner's next novel, ***Light in August*** (1932), one of his two or three greatest works, combines the largely comic frame story of Lena Grove, a simple woman searching through several states for her unborn child's father, with the much longer and tragic tale of Joe Christmas, an abused child who has grown up to be a murderer. Few novels have delved so deeply into race, obsessive religion, or the conundrums of sexuality.

The novel ***Absalom, Absalom!*** (1936) is widely considered one of his greatest achievements. The book resurrects Quentin Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* as one of the novel's four narrators, which include his Harvard roommate, Shreve McCannon, Quentin's father, and Miss Rosa Coldfield. The complex, often flamboyant, even tortured writing makes enormous demands on readers, but Faulkner's most anguished book ultimately demonstrates a convincing logic and a profound effect.

In ***The Hamlet*** (1940) and ***Go Down, Moses*** (1942), Faulkner found his masterly stride again. The former began a trilogy of novels about the rise of the Snopes family which continued in ***The Town*** (1957) and ***The Mansion*** (1959). A powerful climax is reached in what is perhaps Faulkner's most impressive and sustained piece of writing, "**The Bear**", which uses a hunt to explore the meaning of history, manhood and responsibility to nature. Although we think of Faulkner as a triumphant figure, all of his books except *Sanctuary* were out of print before Malcolm Cowley's publication of *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946. This instigated a reassessment of Faulkner's work, which was powerfully accelerated when French critics lauded his genius. ***Intruder in the Dust*** (1948), used a "detective" story format to tell the story of Lucas Beauchamp, a proud black man falsely accused of murder. Faulkner's ***Collected Stories*** appeared in 1950, setting the stage for his acceptance of the **Nobel Prize** for literature in Stockholm, where his short but inspiring acceptance speech was much admired; he predicted that despite the specter of nuclear destruction, man would not only endure; he would prevail.

Faulkner's final years included increasing spells of illness, accidents and deadening alcoholism, alongside public appearances and pronouncements. The state department made him a virtual roving

ambassador (most memorably in Japan in 1955) and he eventually accepted a position at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where he wished to relocate permanently in order to be near his daughter Jill and his grandsons. Years of abusing his body, however, led to a fatal in 1962. A final Yoknapatawpha book, ***The Reivers***, nostalgically returned to Faulkner's childhood, via the delightful coming-of-age story of young Lucas Priest and his adventures in Memphis with Boone Hogganbeck; it posthumously won Faulkner his second Pulitzer Prize.

Faulkner is celebrated today as the greatest American writer of the twentieth century and as one of the greatest writers of all time. Grounded in both classic and contemporary literature, equipped with a profound sense of history and tradition, doggedly determined to find modern stylistic and philosophic solutions to literary social, and spiritual problems, Faulkner developed a Protean aesthetic, one well equipped to harness the energies of a dynamic age. This is most evident in his persistent, often heroic dissection of racism, which indicates an agreement with W. E. B. DuBois's assertion that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." A few years before his death, Faulkner asserted that "the writer's first job. . ." is "always to search the soul. . .and to give a proper, moving picture of man in the human dilemma." It is a testament to his courage and commitment that he regularly met this exacting standard throughout his long, often difficult, but ultimately triumphant career.

The Sound and the Fury

MAIN CHARACTERS:

Jason Compson III: the head of the Compson family until his death from alcoholism in 1912. Mr. Compson is the father of Quentin, Caddy, Jason IV, and Benjy, and the husband of Caroline.

Caroline Compson: the wife of Mr. Compson and mother of the four Compson children.

Quentin Compson: the oldest of the Compson children and the narrator of the novel's second chapter. He commits suicide by drowning himself just before the end of his first year at Harvard.

Caddy Compson: the second oldest of the Compson children and the only daughter.

Jason Compson IV: the second youngest of the Compson children and the narrator of the novel's third chapter.

Benjy Compson: the youngest of the Compson children and narrator of the novel's first chapter. Born Maury Compson, after his maternal uncle, his name is changed to Benjamin in 1900, when he is discovered to be severely mentally retarded.

Damuddy: the Compson children's grandmother (they call her "Damuddy"), who dies when they are young.

Uncle Maury Bascomb: Mrs. Compson's brother. Benjy is initially named after Uncle Maury, but Benjy's condition convinces her to change her son's name.

Miss Quentin: Caddy's illegitimate daughter, who is raised by the Compsons after Caddy's divorce.

Dilsey: The Compsons' black cook, at the center of the fourth chapter.

Roskus: Dilsey's husband and the Compsons' servant.

T.P.: one of Dilsey's sons, T.P. gets drunk with Benjy and fights with Quentin at Caddy's wedding.

Versh: another of Dilsey's sons and Benjy's keepers.

Frony: Dilsey's daughter. Frony is also Luster's mother and works in the Compsons' kitchen.

Luster: Frony's son and Dilsey's grandson. Luster is a young boy who looks after Benjy in 1928, despite the fact that he is only half Benjy's age.

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Mr. and Mrs. Patterson: the Compsons' next-door neighbors. Uncle Maury has an affair with Mrs. Patterson until Mr. Patterson intercepts a note Maury has sent to her.

Dalton Ames: a local Jefferson boy who is probably the father of Caddy's child, Miss Quentin.

Shreve MacKenzie: Quentin's Canadian roommate at Harvard.

Sydney Herbert Head: the prosperous banker whom Caddy marries. Herbert later divorces Caddy when he discovers he's not the father of the baby she's expecting.