William Faulkner's Short Fiction Short Guide

William Faulkner's Short Fiction by William Faulkner

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

Faulkner's characters become grotesque when they seize upon some way of ordering their experience and impose it on their worlds without regard for the consequences. For example, Abner Snopes in "Barn Burning" (Harper's Magazine, 1939), builds the meaning of his life out of an absolute sense of personal honor. Unable to brook any challenge to that honor, he fires his successive landlords' barns in revenge for slights he often provokes himself. As a result, he keeps his large family perpetually on the move and finally drives away his son, Sarty, who will not live by his father's code.

Grotesque characters sometimes lead to a Gothic story. Faulkner's first major published story was "A Rose for Emily" (The Forum, 1930). Emily Grierson becomes entrapped in conventional aristocratic expectations for women.

She struggles against these restrictions, imposed upon her by her family and by her whole community, by clinging to those she loves, even after they die.

She eventually murders a man and secretly keeps his body in her house for thirty years, until it is discovered after her death.

Most grotesque are those characters who seem to choose a heartless meaning. Abner believes he is caring for his family in a good way. Abner's other son, Flem, shows himself in several stories to be one of those who is corrupted by the values of an emerging mass culture. He dedicates himself to making money in any legal way, regardless of the consequences, as illustrated in "Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard" (The Saturday Evening Post, 1932; rewritten for The Hamlet, 1940). Flem is shown as a sharp trader, willing to reduce people to base passions, such as greed, in order to exploit them. Although he wants money, he seems to be without passion himself.

Faulknerian heroes are those men and women who can order their lives around the basic human virtues without subordinating all of them to just one. Sarty Snopes loves his father, but he leaves rather than let that love force him into serving his father's warped sense of honor. One such hero who appears in several stories is V. K. Suratt, the sewing machine salesman in the Jefferson area. In later stories and novels, his name is changed to V. K. Ratliff. Ratliff has two of the main characteristics of a Faulkner hero: humor and the ability to see events from multiple points of view.

In "Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard," Suratt is one of Flem's main antagonists. He is clearly superior to Flem because of his sense of humor.

Suratt can stand outside himself and laugh at himself, even when he is most foolish. He is reduced by Flem to a greed so blinding that he pays all he has for a piece of land where he has been fooled into believing there is buried gold. He realizes that the money he and his partners found before they bought the land probably is not old enough to have been buried during the Civil War. As he and his partner open their sacks to examine the money, he makes a good humored bet that he will find an older coin in his

sack than his partner will find. This return to sanity saves him from the fate of the third partner who continues to dig even after he knows he has been swindled.

Several characters appear in many stories as well as in the novels. In addition to Suratt/Ratliff and Flem Snopes, one of the more important is Gavin Stevens. Stevens is a major character in at least four novels, and appears in a number of others. In the short stories, he is most prominent in those collected in Knight's Gambit, where as Yoknapatawpha County Attorney, he acts as a sort of detective. Stevens is a Southern, bachelor intellectual, educated at Harvard and Heidelberg, who has settled in Jefferson to practice law. In "An Error in Chemistry" (Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 1946), Stevens and the Sheriff recognize an impostor when he mixes a drink incorrectly.

Social Concerns

Most of Faulkner's stories deal with one of a few subjects: stories of Southern country people, Mississippi Indian stories, stories of Southern small town life, and war stories from the Civil War and World War I. Although there are stories with different subjects, few are among his best. Prominent social concerns in these stories include conflicts between traditional and modern cultures, war, and racism.

Perhaps the main social concern of Faulkner's stories is the plight of the individual in a mass, technological society. Individuals, families, and small communities of friends and neighbors are shown to have great dignity and integrity, but larger groups such as nations and races are shown to corrupt individuals and to feed on compulsions that threaten the humanity of their members. Faulkner's stories often include a transition from a traditional family-based culture to a modern, more commercial culture. Although each has its weaknesses and strengths, the traditional culture is usually shown to be superior. For example, in "The Tall Men," which first appeared in The Saturday Evening Post in 1941, a modern civil servant's impressions of Southern country farmers are proven incorrect. He has built up his ideas of them while working as a welfare administrator. When he shifts to administering the World War II draft, he expects to find shiftless malingerers, but meets instead fiercely independent men who, while they 1379 disdain the draft, are quick to enlist when told their country needs them.

Faulkner's attitude toward war is complicated. His war stories, such as "Turnabout" (The Saturday Evening Post, 1932), often show the incredible and generous heroism of men in the service of their countries contrasted with the petty goals for which they are made to fight. "Turnabout" ends with an American World War I pilot bombing the headquarters of some Axis officers, saying as he releases the bombs: "God!

God! If they were all there — all the generals, the admirals, the presidents and the kings — theirs, ours — all of them." He is revolted by the waste of young heroes he has seen in the service of these leaders.

Faulkner was concerned with racism as a social phenomenon. Several of his stories deal with a kind of social madness that erupts when a Negro man is thought to have made any sort of sexual advance toward a white woman.

"Dry September" (Scribner's Magazine, 1931), shows men from Jefferson, Mississippi, the town Faulkner based on Oxford, surrendering their decency as they succumb to the insane ritual of retribution. Normally decent and kind men find themselves driven to re-arrange the known facts of the supposed offense in order to rationalize the murder they must commit. Behind this active violence is a usually passive racism which forms a barrier between Negroes and whites, depriving them of the richness of each others' life experience. In "That Evening Sun" (The American Mercury, 1931), a terrified Negro woman is unable to communicate her terror to the white children or adults from whom she seeks protection against the estranged lover she fears will kill her.

In some of his Indian stories, Faulkner explores the origins of American racism in Negro slavery. "Red Leaves" (The Saturday Evening Post, 1930), deals in part with the contacts between three races: whites, Negroes, and Indians.

Here and in other stories, he suggests that the dynamics of the slave/master relationship in a capitalist economy and a Protestant culture lead toward the growth of barriers to communication between the races and toward the kinds of mass hysteria reflected in "Dry September."

Techniques

Faulkner is a great writer in part because he mastered virtually all of the techniques of representation that had been developed in the two centuries of intense fiction writing before he took up his pen. Nearly all these techniques appear in his short stories. Two characteristics stand out because they help account for his success in publishing his stories in mass market magazines while also suggesting why his novels were less successful in the mass market. Although his stories are predominantly serious in theme, they are filled with wit and humor. However, in virtually every story he wrote, he attempted to stretch readers beyond what they might expect to find in a popular story.

Few of his stories are as broadly humorous as "A Bear Hunt" (The Saturday Evening Post, 1934). There Ratliff plays a joke on a hunter to cure him of the hiccups that have plagued him for more than a day, only to have that joke rebound upon him. In more serious stories, however, there are often humorous events. "A Rose for Emily" includes the incident of the town officials sneaking around Emily's house at night, spreading lime to get rid of the smell that is revealed many years later to have been her lover's decaying body.

In "Red Leaves," while the slave who is supposed to be killed and buried with his dead Indian chief owner, flees through the swamp, the obese new chief pursues him carried on a litter.

Fat Moketubbe sometimes loses consciousness from the pain of trying to wear the tiny slippers that are one badge of his new office.

Faulkner nearly always asks his readers to see moral and spiritual complexity in his stories. "An Error in Chemistry" is a formulaic detective story, yet it ends with a longer than usual examination of the murderer's motives that asks the reader to understand a great escape and disguise artist whose gift led him to such contempt for mankind that, when fallen upon hard times, he would try to use it to make a fortune by murdering two people. Gavin Stevens and the sheriff agree that the criminal failed to know himself, having missed the truth Stevens says that all the good books reveal, although in different ways.

Themes

Faulkner expressed what he considered the main themes of all his fiction in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech at Stockholm in December 1950. In that speech, he said modern humanity is suffering from a spiritual tragedy: "There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" Fiction should help humanity to deal with this tragedy by returning readers to universal human concerns, "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." He went on to say that the writer's duty and privilege is "to help man endure by lifting his heart." The writer does this by showing "the human heart in conflict with itself."

Faulkner tends to focus his fiction on characters attempting to find or create meaning in a universe that does not provide meanings ready to be discovered. His is not the traditional Christian universe, created by an anthropomorphic God and made meaningful by God's communications with humanity. Instead, it is a universe like Herman Melville's, which sometimes seems to reveal fragmentary meanings, but never a whole meaning that one can base one's life on. In this respect, Faulkner seems directly influenced by some of the writers he admired most, such as Melville, Joseph Conrad, and Sherwood Anderson — for example, "The Book of the Grotesque" in Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919).

Adaptations

While Faulkner was working in Hollywood, he attempted to make screenplays of several stories. Only a few were finally produced. Today We Live (1933) was based on "Turnabout."

The Damned Don't Cry (1950) was based in part on "The Brooch" (Scribner's, 1936). Neither of these was especially successful. "The Brooch," "Shall Not Perish" (Story, 1943), and "Old Man" (part of The Wild Palms, 1939), were broadcast on Lux Video Theatre in 1953.

"Barn Burning" was eventually adapted for the Public Broadcasting Service's American Short Story series (1980).

Bruce Kawin argues that Tomorrow (1971) is one of the best film adaptations of a Faulkner story. "Tomorrow" (The Saturday Evening Post, 1940) is a Gavin Stevens detective story eventually collected in Knight's Gambit.

Key Questions

Faulkner's short stories have accumulated a long history of discussion in college and university classrooms, where "A Rose for Emily" and "Barn Burning" are among standard texts used to introduce Faulkner and to explore technical aspects of reading and writing short fiction. All of the stories in Knight's Gambit and in the volumes of collected and "uncollected" stories raise a variety of issues for discussion. Topics one can count upon generating interesting and often exciting discussion would include the themes of race, gender, and world view.

Faulkner lived in a deeply racist, segregated culture. He loved that culture and deplored racism. Exploring the complexities of this view as they emerge in stories such as "Dry September" opens questions about racial relations in the United States that continue to be relevant at the turn of the twentyfirst century.

Faulkner's treatment of women in his fiction remains a controversial topic. The depth of his power to imagine and sympathize with his female characters equals that of any male writer of fiction he knew, and yet the traditional culture to which he gave allegiance was unequivocally patriarchal. Sorting out the attitudes toward women expressed in a story such as "A Rose for Emily" is a very complex matter that can lead to deep and serious discussions.

Faulkner's world view, although it has its roots in the nineteenth century and earlier, continues to be controversial. A careful examination of almost any story will show a controlling attitude that there are no moral absolutes given to humanity by a transcendental controlling intelligence. Faulkner believed in universal truths that emerge from human experience, but not in absolute truths given to humanity in scripture. In a story like "Barn Burning," one can see one kind of absolutist in Abner Snopes contrasted with a sort of universalist in his son, Sarty. The absolutist Abner imposes his unquestionable rules on everyone and produces endless destruction and pain, even in the name of love. The universalist Sarty begins moral reasoning in the recognition of his common humanity even with those whose social values and customs contradict his own. In an age of resurgent fundamentalism with its appeal to transcendentally grounded absolutes, the discussion of Faulkner's world view as reflected in his fiction continues to be of great interest to many readers.

1. In "Barn Burning," how can we explain Abner's apparent drive toward violence against his employers? How can we explain Sarty's resistance to his father? How does Sarty manage to resolve the conflict between family loyalty and his sense of there being a higher value?

2. In "Dry September," what are the elements that drive the town essentially to make up a version of what happened to Minnie Cooper that allows them to destroy Will Mayes? How should we understand Minnie's motives for her part in this and her response to the consequences?

3. It may be somewhat surprising to notice in "Red Leaves" that the Indian tribe is shown to own slaves. What similarities and differences do you see between how the Indians treat slaves and how we typically understand white owners treated their slaves? How should we account for the differences?

4. In "A Rose for Emily," Emily may be seen as a victim of the town and as triumphant over the town. What reasons can be given for each point of view? Which view seems more right to you? To what extent is her victimization a consequence of her being a woman?

5. Explain why the Compson family in "That Evening Sun," seems unable to understand Nancy's fear or to really help her.

6. In any story in Knight's Gambit, think about how the story stretches the detective genre and about why Faulkner moved away from traditional expectations.

7. In any of the stories found in Part II of Uncollected Stories, think about why Faulkner probably did not include them in Collected Stories.

8. In any of the unpublished stories in Part III of Uncollected Stories, think about why these stories were never published.

9. Faulkner thought of himself as a humanist. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he described a set of values that arise from the human heart in response to human experience, saying that these were "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." Discuss how these values appear in any of the stories.

10. Faulkner's belief in universals of the heart puts him at odds with that side of the Christian tradition that affirms transcendental absolutes, the belief that God gave humanity absolute moral rules to follow in the Bible. In what ways does this conflict between universals and absolutes appear in the story or stories you have read?

Literary Precedents

Faulkner had read widely and learned technical possibilities from everyone he read. He often drew on popular genres such as humor, Gothic, and detective stories. When asked which writers he admired most and continued to read, he named the Old Testament, Charles Dickens, Conrad, Miguel de Cervantes, Gustave Flaubert, Honore de Balzac, Feodor Dostoevski, Leo Tolstoy, William Shakespeare, Melville, John Keats, and A. E. Housman, among some others. He thought James Joyce and Thomas Mann to be among the greatest writers of his generation. He expressed admiration for Thomas Wolfe and Sherwood Anderson, among other contemporary Americans.

Faulkner's stories show influences from all of these sources. His most distinctive and characteristic stories are those set in his mythical Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. In these stories the landscape, characters, and compulsions of his native country become the source of a rich and living fiction. From this point of view, his main literary ancestors are those writers who also mastered their techniques, then built teeming fictional worlds out of their home ground, including Dickens of London, Balzac of Paris, Nathaniel Hawthorne of New England, Joyce of Dublin, and Henry James of the capitals of the West.

Related Titles

Yoknapatawpha County is a unified landscape, with its own cast of characters and its own history. In this sense, all of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha fiction is related. Furthermore, insofar as the thematic unity of his work that he suggests in his Nobel Prize Speech really obtains, all of his work is related thematically. Only a few of the more obvious relationships can be mentioned here.

Of Faulkner's major social concerns, racism and the impact of mass culture remain important in virtually all of his novels. Go Down, Moses (1942), acted out of revised stories that had appeared earlier in magazines, deals powerfully with both of these concerns.

His interest in war touches many, but not all of his works, most notably The Unvanquished (1938), made up of previously published then revised Civil War stories, and A Fable (1954), an anti-war novel set during World War I. Although all of his works deal in one way or another with the problems of finding meaning and human order in a universe that does not provide them, Faulkner's masterpieces present the complexities of this theme most effectively. The Sound and the Fury (192) shows the dissolution of a family in the face of the parents' loss of faith in their tradition. A mother's desire for transcendence tests her rural family in As I Lay Dying (1930). Thomas Sutpen, the protagonist of Absalom, Absalom!

(1936), destroys himself and his two families in his vigorous attempts to impose a rigid dream of order on the living flow of his family in history.

Important characters who emerge in the stories eventually take their places in novels. Flem Snopes, Gavin Stevens, and V. K. Ratliff (Suratt) are major characters in Snopes, a trilogy consisting of The Hamlet (1940), The Town (1957), and The Mansion (1959). The serio-comic rivalry between the rapacious Flem, the noble-minded and often ineffectual Stevens, and the earthy humorist and moralist, Ratliff, ends in a tragic affirmation of humanity's need for meaning and order in the increasingly complex chaos of modern history. Gavin Stevens appears in Intruder in the Dust (1948) as a lawyer sufficiently blinded by his benevolent and paternalistic racism that he needs his young nephew, Chick Mallison, to jar him into his proper role as a detective in this moralistic thriller. These are only a few of the characters who recur in Faulkner's fiction.

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