INTRODUCTION

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech William Faulkner said that the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself alone can make good writing. He says “only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat” (Meriwether 119). Faulkner’s concern for the moral issues of human society in general and the Southern American society in particular, his approach to human problems in a radical way has led him to be placed amongst the important novelists of modern times. One may write on any social issue or the general human predicaments, but a true writer of the stature of Faulkner wants to penetrate deep into the layers of human consciousness as well as of illusions; and in doing so Faulkner frequently finds that the problems with human heart is not that simple as the moralists and polemicists would gladly apply labels to indicate them. The human experience that Faulkner explores and decides is not only frequently elusive, but also inalienably wedded to the very life force, the separation of which is very painful, and his characters often fail to succeed in doing this.

To understand Faulkner in larger context, we need to look back and observe his contemporary literary scene in America and England. Influenced by T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound, at the turn of the century, brought the imagist movement, which revolted against the conventional poetic materials and versification. The typical imagist poem is written in free verse and undertakes to render as precisely and tersely as possible, and without comment or generalization, the writer’s impression of a visual object or scene; often the impression is rendered by means of metaphor, or by juxtaposing, without indicating a relation, the
description of one object with that of a second and diverse object. Since the imagist disparages abstraction and sticks to the impression derived from the image, literature, consequently, aimed not to reveal meaning, but rather to exist.

The post World War I generation writers, severely disillusioned with the existing ideals of the society from the war experience, found a good alternative to the conventional literary canon. In this new mode of literary expression, a writer's achievement could be measured by his mastery of the hard bold metaphor. Consequently, literature achieved a new vitality, a new method of dramatic presentation, and a new willingness to allow meaning to remain implicit. The publication of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922 opened a new possibility of poetic expression which caught the typical mood of the time. With no idealism or values left, literary expression became fragmented, surrealistic, and frequently experimental.

It is said that First World War was fought for ideals, to make the world a safe and better place by prevailing the democratic values. But the upheld ideal could not survive the war. By the time the war was ended, a whole generation of young men had sacrificed their lives, and those who lived saw that it was done for nothing, and were sickened by the idea of sacrifice and almost all ideas. The postwar generation bitterly concluded that values and ideals had been frauds.

Faulkner's contemporary Ernest Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* which was the great statement of protest against the waste of human lives in the First World War. The hero of the novel Frederic Henry acknowledges: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and expression in vain......abstract words such as glory, honor, courage..." (AFA 196). The
disillusionment expressed by Hemingway's protagonist may be taken as the most representative of the general mood of the writers of Faulkner's time.

While the Northern writers of the postwar period engaged themselves on various subjects in their individual style and techniques, William Faulkner took up his Southern homeland as the site of his literary work. The South was rural, isolated and under-educated with a large number of Negro populations because of its economy based on cotton plantation which required Negro slave labours. Before Faulkner emerged as a major writer, the South was considered a cultural and literary desert as, except Edgar Allan Poe, virtually no writers of national reputation had appeared. With its history of slavery and its strong defense of racial segregation after the Civil War, much of the fiction and poetry of the nineteenth century written in the South was purposive of defending the Southern way of life.

In the 1920s and 1930s, however, there was a sort of literary renaissance in the South. The aftermath of First World War, which affected the entire USA, was one immediate reason among others. The aspiring young writers who fought in France or worked in New York achieved critical distance to try their hands transcending the regional consciousness. Meanwhile, the plantation economy was gradually replaced by industry from the North, thereby the regional agrarian world entering into an uncertain New South. Unlike on the soil of the battleground in Europe, where the postwar economic and political scenario was in confusion, America was recovering quickly, at least, politically and economically, if not psychologically. So it was natural that the literary scene of the South had been reversed by the emergence of a group of writers such as John Crowe Ransom, Tennessie William, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren and, of
course, William Faulkner – all of whom achieved national and even international recognition.

Faulkner did not bother about the success or failure of his work while he was in the creative process. Instead of success, he often anticipated failure. This unusual trait in his character contributed to his bold novelistic innovation in *The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom!* etc. Because of pursuing the guidance of his own liking in structure and style, Faulkner is called an uneven writer. However, Robert Penn Warren calls the unevenness of Faulkner “an index to his vitality” (94) as it enabled him to take risk, to try for new effects and to make new explorations of material and method. The most obvious thing in Faulkner’s novels is fragmentariness. This fragmentary structure is the core of Faulkner’s novelistic vision; it describes a world of broken orders, where events may run parallel without any sign of convergence like the stories of Lena Grove and Joe Christmas in *Light in August*.

William Faulkner started his literary career as a poet. He liked the poetry of Shelley, Keats, T.S. Eliot. We cannot rule out the influence of Eliot on his literary career, not only in his poems but also in his novels, especially in the development of form. Although he inherited his technique from his predecessors such as T.S. Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, etc. he is original in many ways. He is one of the few writers who could afford to stake their writings for experimental venture. Faulkner may be called a master innovator who has used his literary technique to examine the problems of human heart. He is truly an avant-garde writer with a difference.

Human experience is a term that covers the whole range of activities as well as awareness of a person, community or the society as a whole. Anything
may be picked up for discussion. But Faulkner himself confined his exploration of human experience to the core area which underlies all the ramifications of human problems and plights. His approach is both synchronic and diachronic. He applies historical perspective to look at the present because he thinks the past always remain in the present, and the future, which is in the process of being, carries the present.

This understanding necessarily leads one to look at reality as one in a state of motion—a fundamental notion with which man grapples, because man's attitude is to catch hold of the reality in fixity. The notion of dynamism in both life and experience enforces man to accept the fluidity of reality. On the other hand, man, by nature, feels more comfortable with fixity as a sanctuary of his existence. Man's struggle to reach his goal is, in a paradoxical way, a struggle to stop the creative evolutions of reality. Reality is in a state of being, which man cannot accept easily. Faulkner has repeatedly tried to examine this phenomenon in his works.

Man's cognitive process comes through synthesizing various experiences, and this process is not easily achieved. Man learns from experiences and experience acquisition itself is sometimes a painful process. For this reason man does not want to change what he has acquired for his knowledge. Knowledge is the sum total of his experience. Without experience a true knowledge may not come to a person. Acquisition of knowledge is related to man's inquisitiveness, which from a certain point of time in man's life may die away. And ultimately at one point of time, man resists to adopt a new knowledge, because man's desire to learn new things does not remain the same at all stages of life. With the passage of time, as one acquires practical experience about the self and others, a sense
of complacency naturally comes to stay. This complacency may be spread to the whole community through writing, verbal contact, indoctrination, etc. Ultimately resistance to reality, which is in motion, becomes a spontaneous response on the part of every individual and community.

Starting with Soldiers' Pay, Faulkner wrote nineteen novels. For this thesis I have selected four major novels namely The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom! and Light in August. These novels were written almost consecutively only punctuated by Sanctuary in between As I Lay Dying and Light in August and Pylon in between Light in August and Absalom, Absalom! And more importantly they were written in the prime of his creative period. Again they share a single and recurring theme of legend and reality. In fact his obsession with this notion runs through most of his fictional outputs. Although I have based the thesis within these four novels, there are other important novels such as The Hamlet, Go down, Moses and Mosquitoes from which I have quoted in order to explicate certain points which find better expression in these works than in the selected pieces. In the quotations from Go down, Moses, I have shown the book as a collection of short stories, because most often the chapters of the novel are taken as short stories rather than chapters of a novel. Since most of them appeared in the form of short story before they were combined in the form of a novel and are still considered collection of short stories by many critics, I believe my action is justifiable here.

The first chapter of the thesis is about Yoknapatawpha, the mythical imaginary world created by Faulkner. All the novels discussed here have their background to Yoknapatawpha. Like R.K. Narayan's Malgudi, Yoknapatawpha
has been created with some recognizable features of the locality upon which it is based. Just as Narayan's Malgudi and its Lowly Road have their origin based on the South Indian cities Mysore and Chennai, the town of the author, Faulkner has built this fictional world around his home County Lafayette in the Southern Mississippi. To understand Faulkner's fictional strategy, one needs to have an acquaintance with the history and people of Yoknapatawpha. For this reason an attempt has been made to re-create its history with chronological sense in mind. Information about the history of Yoknapatawpha is lying scattered in different novels and short stories. The legends of the Chickasaw tribes and their gradual assimilation with the white population and, later on, with the blacks nicely fit into the required atmosphere of Faulkner's fiction. All the novels of Faulkner maintain a striking structural implementation that has legend-like structure and treatment.

The first chapter has been written in two parts, the first part tracing the history of Yoknapatawpha and following its gradual development to the present, while the second part makes an attempt to explicate the immediate signification of the physical/geographical description of the first part. The second part tries to justify the symbolic dimension of the intensely local characteristic of the first part. Faulkner has used the actual to signify greater social and moral implications either in symbolic dimension or in the construction of parallelism. Even the problems of slavery and miscegenation, which are unique to the Southern society, yield to interpretations at the level of universal human situation in the sense that such domination and exploitation are common to all society irrespective of place and time.

The subsequent four chapters try to study Faulkner's ways of exploring
human experience through his major fictions. All the novels included in these chapters have been examined to establish Faulkner's consistency with his idea of legend and reality despite the distinct individuality of each novel. Since this thesis is about a study on Faulkner's exploration of human experience, an attempt has been made to find out issues related to the problem of human perceptions, and actions based on those perceptions. Faulkner is insistent on the problem of human perceptions, because he thinks the common problems of human society are intimately related to this. The study tries to show that Faulkner's approach to this problem is both examination and exposition. An examination of his works shows that he had a profound realization that reality has to be treated with an awareness of multiplicity in its manifestation, because the supreme reality is inherently unattainable by a common perceptive power available with man. He believes that there is no available framework to grasp reality in its true perspective.

The contrast of legend and reality used by Faulkner in his novels indicates the validity of one basic assumption that his characters, saturated with the traits of illusion arising from their attempt to take shelter in the former as their security, become bizarre figures. Taking this lead I have tried to show Faulkner's skillful examination of the shades and layers of this problem in the individual novels discussed in this thesis. Here it may be mentioned that As I Lay Dying does not readily fit into this line of argument, although it has its obvious theme similar to the dominant idea mentioned above. Although this chapter focuses on Faulkner's examination of human inconsistency in defining madness and sanity, which might sound more of a psychological study, the chapter has been built with Darl, the second son of Addie Bundren, as the measuring stick to examine the subterra-
nean complexity of human mind in action beneath the surface simplicity.

All the four chapters developed on individual novels try to focus on characters in illusion, who are usually metaphoric and very articulate, because they have high imaginative power to magnify things out of proportions. Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Miss Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and Gail Hightower in *Light in August* are some of this category of characters. Their narratives as well as actions are characterized by vivid imaginations, and they take strong stance as they try to pursue their convictions. As the chapters trace the path of the characters in illusions, Faulkner's deeper and profound concern to examine human nature and psychology in a dispassionate way has been kept in mind. We cannot study Faulkner's characters within the framework of the conventional tools of literary criticism, such as types or representation of good or evil. Faulkner's characters are at once victims and victimizers of one level of consciousness or another. For example, in *Light in August* we find a character, Percy Grimm, who can be identified as a Nazi storm trooper, has his background of warped past—he was born too late to be a part of the heroes of the Civil War. The stunted ambition, however, catches fire when it finds an opportunity for an outlet as he joins the Jeffersonian crowd to pursue Joe Christmas for lynching. This is an example of Faulkner's interest in the deeper things of human behaviour.

The problem of perspective is a philosophical as well as empirical conception that Faulkner is fascinated with. *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel which deals with this major theme that recurs in Faulkner's fictions. I have devoted the fourth chapter to study Faulkner's application of this idea to explore human
experience, while the fifth chapter dwells on his examination of the burden of the past; how it is a part of the present and how it may cripple or, conversely, enlighten an individual.

The sixth chapter of this thesis deals with Faulkner's technical and stylistic achievement. As the title of the chapter suggests it has been divided into two sections: the first part dealing with Faulkner's technical achievement and the second part throwing light on his examination of the use of language in the formation of behavioural and psychological response of characters. It may be mentioned here that the study of Faulkner's style has been done by ignoring the conventional approach in which writer's use of language, its syntax, imagery, symbolism, etc. are examined, although one may find these aspects mentioned here and there. I believe this is in keeping with the perspective I have adopted to develop this thesis.

The last chapter tries to sum up what has been discussed in the body of the thesis. In this chapter I have made attempts to indicate Faulkner's integrity and consistency, although to some he might appear like an eccentric writer whom they call "a master dissector of aristocratic mores" (Leary xviii).

Works Cited

