CHAPTER I

Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner's Fictional World

Though neither social photography nor historical record, the Yoknapatawpha chronicle is intensely related to the milieu from which it is derived; it is an appropriation from a communal memory, some great store of half-forgotten legends, of which Faulkner is the last, grieving recorder. It is as if the whole thing, no longer available to public experience, lived fresh and impervious in his mind, as the memory of the Civil War lives in the mind of the Reverend Hightower in Light in August — a tragic charade of the past. Thus the difficulty and ultimately the unimportance of dating events or of reconciling the many contradictory datings in Faulkner world — in a vision sequence melt into simultaneity. So too with Faulkner's productivity; he calls upon what it serves him as a private and luminous reserve, this impinges at every point on the world in which he lives. (Howe, Irving. William Faulkner: A Critical Study. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1951. 31)
Yoknapatawpha is not a totally imaginary world of which every aspect is carefully designed, but a complicated story known in its essentials to the narrator. It is a story of confused family records that can be comprehended only with difficulty. Behind the telling of this story there is always a desperate search for order, not merely as a strategy of narrative but also as a motive for composition. Incidents reappear from one book to another with their meaning changed and their tone modified; characters, insignificant in one book, gain major dimension in another novel or story. On some occasion, episodes that have been brilliantly unfolded are repeated briefly in later books. As the Yoknapatawpha story grows there are additions, rejections and even afterthoughts. As Faulkner did not take trouble to make things explicit, he returned to neglected fragments of his story working on the guidance of impulse rather than by careful intention, and his occasional slips in chronology or names are attributed to his indifference to consistency that is typical of legends. Faulkner has left 19 novels and 126 short stories till the end of his career. Most of the characters of this corpus of works reappear in several novels or stories which gives the similitude of saga of dynasties or families. This unique feature of family saga lends an atmosphere of legend to the characters of his fictional world. To understand Faulkner's works it is very important to know Yoknapatawpha county both in historical and social perspective. The knowledge of the social and geographical contour of the county enables the reader to grasp not only the author's fictional strategies but also his growth overtime in the vocation of an artist.

Faulkner's mythical world Yoknapatawpha is situated in northern Mississippi, roughly bounded by Tallahachie River on the north and the
Yoknapatawpha River on the south, and bisected north and south by John Sartoris's railroad. The face of the land varies from low-lying, fertile and heavily timbered river bottoms to sandy pine hills in the northeast section known as Beat Four. Jefferson, the centre of the county is surrounded by gently undulating farmland and is located approximately at the geographical center of the county. This town is built around a columned and porticoed courthouse which is built inside an octagonal park located at the center of the Square; among others, at one end of the Square there is “a monument of a Confederate soldier, shielding his eyes from the sun in the classic searcher’s pose and staring boldly south” (Tuck 1). The buildings around the Square are two-storied, most of them with a second story gallery reached by an outside staircase. The only other town of any significance is the hamlet of Frenchman’s Bend at the southeastern corner of the county. Memphis, the closest larger city, is seventy-five miles northwest of Jefferson, and Oxford, the location of the state university, is forty miles away. The county consists of 2,400 square miles and in 1936 “the population was 15,611, of which 6,298 were whites and 9,313 were Negroes” (Runyan 182).

The name Yoknapatawpha is derived from that of the Yocana River, sometimes referred to as the Yocanapatafa (or Yocanapatapha) in old records: according to Faulkner, the Chickasaw word Yoknapatawpha (Yo-ko-no-pa-taw-fa) means “water flowing slow through the flatland” (Dabney 24). In the older days, the northern part of the county near the Tallahachie River bottom was a heavily timbered land rife with wildlife—possums, coons, rabbits, squirrels, wild turkeys, deer and even bears. Then the land was inhabited by the Chickasaw Indians, whose nation was ruled by a great chieftain referred to as David Colbert; the
Yoknapatawpha Chickasaws had their own local chief whose title, "the Man", was passed on from father to son. However, perhaps because the history of the Chickasaw was told to the white settlers of the county many years later, long after "the People", as the Indians called themselves, had been driven to a reservation in Oklahoma, the various stories about the Indians are not always consistent with one another. The most famous, or notorious, of the chiefs was Ikkemotubbe (sometimes spelled Ikkemoutubbe). He had been born merely a sub-chief, one of the three children of the mother's side of the family. When he made a journey from north Mississippi to New Orleans by keel boat, he was a young man then and New Orleans was a European city. At New Orleans he passed as the chief, the Man, the hereditary owner of that land which belonged to the male child of the family. In French speaking New Orleans he was called du homme (or l'Homme or de l'Homme), from which came Doom, the name he was later called by the people. All the stories agree that Doom returned from New Orleans with, among other things, a wicker basket full of puppies and small gold box filled with white powder which, when administered to a puppy, would quickly kill it. Soon afterwards, his uncle, the Man, and the Man's son both died suddenly and the Man's brother refused to accept the chieftainship which was his hereditary right; Doom, as the next in line of succession became the Man. Beyond this point, however, the legend of Doom has variance. In "A Justice" Sam Fathers tells young Quentin Compson how Doom came back from New Orleans and succeeded to the chieftainship. After becoming the Man, Doom took some of the people to drag out a steam boat that had died in the Tallahachie River twelve miles away and bring it back to the plantation, where Doom could use the boat as his house. One of the people,
Crawford, stayed at home complaining of a bad back in order to be near one of the black women Doom had brought with him from New Orleans. The woman, although married to a black man, later gave birth to a copper coloured son; Doom settled the quarrel between Crawford and the black man and named the child Had-Two-Fathers – the full name of Sam Fathers. In “The Old People”, however, Sam Fathers says that he is the son of Doom and a quadroon slave; in this variation of the legend Doom married the pregnant slave to a black man and named the baby Had-Two-Fathers. In both versions Doom sells the mother and child to a neighbouring white man – in the former story to Lucius Quentin Carothers McCaslin, and the latter to Quentin McLachan Compson II.

The order of succession of the Chickasaw chiefs is not consistent due to variations of the legend. In "Red Leaves" Doom is the father of Issetibbeha, who succeeds him as the Man, and the grandfather of Moketube. In this variant Issetibbeha became the Man at nineteen. During his chieftainship there arose the problem of what to do with the Negro slaves acquired during his father’s lifetime; the question was finally solved by having the Negroes clear the land and plant grain, which the Indians sold. From the sale of grain and slaves Issetibbeha acquired the money to travel to France; and returned with a gilt bed, a pair of girandoles by whose light it was said that Pompadour arranged her hair while Louis smirked at his mirrored face across her powdered shoulder, and a pair of slippers with red heels. They were too small for him, since he had not worn shoes at all until he reached New Orleans on his way abroad.

Issetibbeha’s son Moketubbe, a fat, squat, indolent boy, developed a fondness for the high-heeled slippers that amounted almost to fetishism. The
influence of the white man, direct or otherwise, had by this time subtly corrupted
the Indians: they had come to own slaves, to sell their produce for money, and to
buy and cherish useless ornaments. Moketubbe, the last of their chiefs, who
succeeded to the chieftainship after Issetibbeha's death, was nothing more than
a sweating mound of flesh, too lazy even to want to take his traditional place in the
manhunt to capture the escaped slave who, as Issetibbeha's body servant, was
required to be buried with him.

In "The Old People" a version of the legend is given that appears to be
more reliable in view of later facts. Here Doom is the son of the sister of old
Issetibbeha, the ruling Man. When Doom returned after his seven-year visit to
New Orleans, he found that Issetibbeha had died and been succeeded by his
son, Moketubbe. The day after Doom's return Moketubbe's eight-year old son
died suddenly and Moketubbe himself abdicated, having been shown by Doom
how quickly Doom's white powder would kill a puppy. Doom became the Man in
1807. The early settlers of the county are reported to have bought or bartered
land from Ikkemotubbe (Doom) between 1810 and 1835—the years during which
Doom would have been the Man, had he succeeded to the chieftainship in 1807.

During the 1830s the Indians were disposed and they began to move to
Oklahoma. About twenty-five years earlier, the first white man had arrived in
Jefferson, the only Chickasaw trading post in the wilderness. The earliest settlers
were Alexander Holston, who accompanied Dr. Samuel Habersham and the latter's
eight-year-old motherless son, and Louis Grenier, a Huguenot young son who
acquired a vast plantation in the southern part of the county and became the first
cotton planter. Holston became the first publican, establishing the tavern still known
as the "Holston House", and Dr. Habersham became the settlement itself for a
time; earlier it was known as Doctor Habersham's, then Habersham's, then
simply Habersham. After Holston's death the county remembered his name in the
tavern he had owned. When Grenier died, his mansion and his estate fell into ruin
and even his name was forgotten; but his property gave the name to the hamlet of
Frenchman's Bend, and his house was known as the Old Frenchman place after
Grenier himself had passed from public memory.

Another early settler was Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, who was
born in Carolina in 1772 and who arrived in the county in 1813. He brought with
him a wife and three children—the twins, Theophilus (Uncle Buck) and Amodeus
(Uncle Buddy), and a daughter. McCaslin acquired land from Ikkemotubbe in the
northern part of the county, seventeen miles from what was to become Jefferson,
and began to build a great house which was never completely finished. He had
brought some slaves with him from Carolina, but made a special trip to New
Orleans and came home with a female slave named Eunice who bore him a
daughter, Tomey, in 1810. Some twenty years later Tomey bore her master—and
father—a son, Terrel, known as Tomey's Turl. Again from Ikkemotubbe (in ex­
change for a horse) McCaslin acquired a quadroon slave and her son, the infant
Sam Fathers, who was to grow to manhood and live to old age on the McCaslin
plantation in the position of carpenter and hunter, not black and not slave and yet
not white and not free. He lived to be the latest descendent of Ikkemotubbe re­
maining in the county and was to be the mentor and guide of young Isaac McCaslin,
old McCaslin's only white grandson to bear his name.

A few years later, in 1811, Jason Lycurgus Compson I came down the
Natchez Trace toward the Chickasaw agency that was to become Jefferson, owning little belongings besides a pair of pistols and the fine little racing mare. Within a year he was half-owner of the store and trading post; within another year he had traded the mare to Ikkemotubbe, or Doom, for a square mile of what was to be the most valuable land in the future town of Jefferson. He built his house and his slave quarters and his stables, and the property, which came to be known as Compson’s Mile or Compson’s Domain, housed his successors. Quentin Mac Lachan Compson II, his son, who was, even if for a short time, a governor of Mississippi; Quentin’s son Jason II, a brigadier general in the Civil War, put the first mortgage on the property in 1866; and his son in turn, Jason III, a lawyer, sold part of the property in 1909 to pay for his son Quentin III’s tuition at Harvard. Of Jason’s four children – Quentin III, Candace, Jason IV, and Benjy – only Jason remained long enough to see the final dissolution of the property and house and even the name, which would die with him, that had been illustrious in the county for almost one hundred years.

After Jason I came Dr. Peabody, old Dr. Habersham’s successor, a preacher named Whitefield, and a new post trader named Ratcliffe. There was also a man named Pettigrew who is mentioned in Requiem for a Nun. Although his surname was later forgotten, he contributed his first name at the christening of the new town:

‘We’re going to have a town’ Peabody said. ‘We already got a church – that’s Whitefield’s cabin. And we’re going to build a school too soon as we get around to it. But we’re going to build the court­house today….. Then we’ll have a town. We’ve already even named
Now Pettigrew stood up, very slow. They looked at one another.

After a moment Pettigrew said, 'So?'

'Ratecliffe says your name's Jefferson.' Peabody said.

'That's right,' Pettigrew said. 'Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew. I'm from old Ferginny.'

Peabody said, 'We decided to name her Jefferson.' Now Pettigrew didn't seem to breathe even. He just stood there, small, frail, less than boy size, childless and bachelor, incorrigibly kinless and lifeless'.

Soon after Jefferson was named, in the early 1830s, a mysterious stranger named Thomas Sutpen arrived in town, causing some local stir because of his silence regarding his ancestors and the wagonload of twenty wild French-speaking Negroes and the dapper little French architect who accompanied him. Sutpen, the son of a West Virginia poor White, had conceived a "grand design" of becoming a member of the ruling aristocracy, and in pursuance of his dream, had first married the daughter of a Haitian sugar-plantation owner. When he discovered—too late—that his wife had Negro blood and would thus prevent him from ever taking his desired place in Southern society, he divorced her and left Haiti taking with him only the slaves and his French architect. Sutpen arrived in Mississippi and bartered or bought from Ikkemotubbe a hundred square miles of fertile bottom land near the Tallahatchie. He spent two years clearing the land and building his plantation house, which was to be, for a time, the grandest in the county. When his house was finished and furnished, Sutpen bargained with
Goodhue Coldfield, a Jefferson merchant, for the hand of Ellen, his oldest daughter. She became Sutpen's wife and the mother of two children, Henry and Judith, who, in Sutpen's dream, were to provide him with grand children to carry on his name and inhabit his house after his own demise. But Charles Bon, Sutpen's son by his first marriage, met and became an intimate friend of young Henry Sutpen; Henry brought Charles home, where, largely through the machinations of Ellen Sutpen, Charles became engaged to Judith. Henry later discovered that Charles was his half-brother and part Negro, and, horrified at the idea of miscegenation even more than incest, shot Charles at the gate of Sutpen's Hundred to prevent the marriage. Sutpen returned from the Civil War, where he had replaced Colonel Sartoris as head of his regiment, to find his daughter "confirmed in sisterhood" and his son a vanished fugitive. He tried to obtain a male heir to carry on his name by seducing the granddaughter of Wash Jones, his poor-white handyman, but the girl gave birth to a daughter. Jones killed Sutpen, the girl, her infant, and himself.

A few years after Sutpen arrived, there was another newcomer, a man named John Sartoris, who came from Carolina with slaves and money. He bought land and built his house four miles north of Jefferson; in 1861 he would stand in the first Confederate uniform the town had ever seen, while in the Square below the Richmond mustering officer enrolled the regiment which Sartoris as its colonel would take to Virginia. Intertwined with the saga of the Sartorises, the family most representative of all that was heroic and romantic in the ante-bellum South, is the beginning of the history of the Snopeses, a numerous clan of mean and avaricious poor whites who swooped down on the county like buzzards in the early years of
the twentieth century. Ab Snopes, the first of the line, made his appearance during the Civil War as a horse and mule thief by aiding Colonel Sartoris's mother-in-law, Rosa Millard, in "requisitioning" animals from both armies; he was at least partially responsible for her death at the hands of a band of lawless poor whites. There were other names linked with that of the Sartoris family through violence, such as the Burdens of New Hampshire, fiery abolitionists who had come to Jefferson during Reconstruction. Two Burdens, grandfather and grandson, were shot in the Square on Election Day by Colonel Sartoris; it was encouraged by Drusilla Hawk as they were on their way to their wedding. Later Sartoris entered a partnership with Ben Redmond in order to build a railroad that would bisect the county. The two men quarreled, the partnership was dissolved, and Redmond finally shot and killed Sartoris after the latter had run against him and won in the election to the state legislature. After Sartoris' death the honorary title of Colonel was bestowed on his son Bayard, who became president of the bank in Jefferson. Bayard's son John (whose history is not recorded) married and fathered twin sons named John and Bayard; John was killed in the First World War, and Bayard was responsible both for the death of his grandfather in an automobile accident and for his own death soon after, when, in Ohio, he tested an airplane that he knew to be unsafe.

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, a young man named Lucius Priest arrived in Mississippi from Carolina. A distant kinsman of old Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, Priest sought out the Yoknapatawpha County branch of his family and found Sarah Edmonds, the great-grand-daughter of old McCaslin. The two branches of the family were joined when he and Sarah married. Lucius came
to be a solid and respected townsman; by the turn of the century he was the
president of the Bank of Jefferson, the town's first bank, and was known as Boss
Priest. His son Maury married Alison Lessup, the daughter of Boss Priest's old
friend and schoolmate; Maury and Alison had three children, Lucius, Maury, Jr.
and Alexander.

Besides the McCaslin, Compsons, Sutpens, and Sartorises, there were
other families of somewhat less distinction and importance. The Beauchamps,
brother and sister, intermarried with Yoknapatawpha County people even though
they lived in a neighbouring county. Miss Sophonciba Beauchamp married Uncle
Buck McCaslin. The name Beauchamp itself was later borne by the Negro part of
the McCaslin family, stemming from Tennie Beauchamp, the slave won from Hubert
Beauchamp by Uncle Turl. The Coldfields, though their name died with the spinster
Miss Rosa Coldfield in 1910, were once respected and relatively prosperous in
the early days in Jefferson. The Stevenses were a pioneer family whose line bore
its finest fruit after the Civil War in the person of Gavin Stevens, county attorney,
Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard and Ph.D. from Heidelberg. There were the Benlows,
whose family included a county judge, a lawyer (the judge's son Horace), and a
girl, Narcissa, who married into the Sartoris family and bore a male Sartoris,
whose father met his rash and untimely end. The De Spains boasted a major in
the Civil War, a president of the bank in Jefferson, and Jefferson's most stately
mansion.

In the pine hills of the district to the north, known as Beat Four, and in
Frenchman's Bend, twenty miles southeast of Jefferson, there sprang up a very
different breed of people from the pre-Civil War aristocrats—self-made or
otherwise—of Jefferson and its surrounding areas. The inhabitants of Frenchman's Bend had come from the northeast, through the Tennessee Mountains by stage marked by the bearing and rising of a generation of children. They came from the Atlantic seaboard and before that, from England and the Scottish and Welsh Marches. They took up land and built one-and-two-room cabins and never painted them, and married one another and produced children. And their descendents still planted cotton in the hills, and in the secret coves of the hills made whiskey of the corn and sold what they did not drink. There was not one Negro land-owner in the entire section. Strange Negroes would absolutely refuse to pass through it after dark.

At about the turn of the twentieth century the old Frenchman Place was owned by sixty-year old Will (Uncle Billy) Varner, who, aside from being the biggest land-owner, owned the store, cotton gin and grist mill, and blacksmith shop, and came close to running—if not actually owning—the town itself. Varner's thirty-year-old bachelor son, Jody, managed the store and it was to Jody that Ab Snopes applied to rent a farm for the season. This event marked the beginning of the influx of Snopeses into the county. Hearing that Ab Snopes had set fire to Major De Spain's barn some years previously and fearing a similar fate for Varner property, Jody installed Ab's son Flem as a clerk in Varner's store as a kind of peace offering. Soon Flem began importing and installing various cousins in the county: Eck Snopes, who became the blacksmith; I.O. Snopes who was for a time the schoolteacher; Ike Snopes, an idiot and Flem's ward; Mink Snopes, another tenant farmer and others. Eck married the daughter of the family at whose house he boarded, promptly fathered a son, named Admiral Dewey, and produced
another, older son from a previous marriage—Wallstreet Panic. The Snopeses multiplied, to the discomfiture of various members of the local citizenry—Jack Houston, Henry Armstid, Vernon Tull, and others.

In less than five years Flem had risen from a clerkship at Varner's store to become an owner of cattle and a barn, a party to various quick and profitable sales, and a petty usurer—turning his land, in short, to any reasonably lawful money-getting enterprise. As a kind of climax to his career in Frenchman's Bend, he married Eula, the beautiful and much sought-after daughter of Will Varner. The marriage, though one of convenience (Eula was pregnant by another man and Flem was impotent), brought Flem the deed to the Old Frenchman's Place and a considerable sum of money—both wedding presents, or perhaps bribes, of his new father-in-law—as well as social position as a relative of the most important man in town. Following his wedding and a lengthy Texas honeymoon, Flem moved his family—Eula and her daughter, Linda, who bore the name of Snopes legally if not otherwise—to Jefferson, where Flem became superintendent of the town power plant. Again, as he had done in Frenchman's Bend, Flem quickly moved up to bigger and better positions, and imported more Snopes cousins.

Shortly after the turn of the century about the time that Flem Snopes arrived in Jefferson, it was beginning to be apparent that the old aristocracy was fighting a losing battle for survival. Their decline was partially due to the deficiency of maintaining plantations without slave labour and to the trying days of Reconstruction. More important, though it was the inability of the once-great planters to come to terms with the post-bellum world, they persisted in trying to live by the economic and moral standards they had known before the war, and
they raised their children and grandchildren to believe in these standards thus rendering them, too, unable to cope with the realities of the twentieth century. It was as if a kind of internal decay began in the old aristocracy after the war, was gradually destroying both its strength and its moral fibre. By 1920 not a single member of the greatest pre-war families was left who was able to assume a position of leadership in the country.

Thomas Sutpen's family, perhaps the most outrageously unfortunate, had come to an end, as far as most of Jefferson knew, with Sutpen's death in 1869; yet three of Sutpen's descendents, and one of his relatives by marriage, survived forty years more. In 1909 Miss Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law, discovered Sutpen's son Henry III hiding in the old plantation house, cared for by his Negro half-sister, Clytie. Miss Rosa summoned an ambulance in an attempt to take Henry to the Jefferson hospital, but Clytie, thinking that the authorities had come to take Henry to prison for the murder of Charles Bon over fifty years before, set fire to the house over her own and Henry's head. All that was left were the smoking ashes of the once-great house and the great-grandson of Sutpenan, an idiot Negro named Jim Bond, who disappeared and was never heard of again.

By 1910 the Compson fortunes had also declined severely. Of the four children of Jason III, Benjy was an idiot, Candace (Caddy) a promiscuous girl who was hastily married to provide a father for the child she carried, Quentin a suicide, and Jason IV a petty, rapacious man whose mind and temperament were more like those of the Snopese than of the Compsons. Caddy brought her daughter Quentin (named for Caddy's dead brother) back to Jefferson to be raised by the family, and she herself disappeared. Quentin also disappeared, running off with a
traveling carnival man at seventeen and the name of Compson came to an end in Jason IV, a childless bachelor, who sold the property to Flem Snopes during the 1940s.

Although the McCaslin family, particularly as represented by Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy, had laid no claim to aristocracy, it too – or at least the white branch of it – was beginning to die out. The only male McCaslin to bear the name was Issac, who, at the end of the First World War, was a childless widower. The Edmondses, the descendants, however, owned the McCaslin property, of old McCaslin's daughter.

Issac had refused to accept his share, and the property had gone to his cousin McCaslin (Cass) Edmonds, the great grand son of old Carothers McCaslin, and was passed on to Edmonds' son and grandson in turn. The Edmondses leased it to tenant farmers and set apart a section for Lucas Beauchamp, the Negro grandson of the first McCaslin. The South, and in particular the old South, still considered descent on the female side to be of lesser strength and importance than lineal descent on the male side – the side which bore the family name. Thus, although the descendants of McCaslin's Negro son Turl and his wife Tennie Beauchamp bore the family name of Beauchamp, they were in one sense more legitimate heirs of the first McCaslin than were the white descendants of McCaslin's daughter. Furthermore, because Turl's mother was also the daughter of McCaslin, Turl's descendants were two generations closer to McCaslin. Thus Lucas Beauchamp, who was born in 1874, was McCaslin's grandson, while Zack Edmonds, who was born in 1873, was McCaslin's great great grandson. The Negro side of the family outnumbered the white side in the illicit union of Roth
Edmonds and the great-granddaughter of Turl in 1940. Since Roth did not marry the girl, the child remained nameless, and the name of Edmonds came to an end with Roth.

In 1920 only one male Sartoris remained alive: Benlow Sartoris, the infant son of Narcissa Benlow and the late John Sartoris III Colonel Bayard Sartoris, who died in 1919, had been succeeded as bank president by Manfred de Spain, a descendant of Major de Spain. However, through the machinations of Flem Snopes, De Spain was later driven from town as the result of a scandal over Flem's wife, Eula, and Flem moved into the bank presidency and the De Spain mansion.

There were, however, a few descendants of Jefferson's first settlers who came into prominence in the twentieth century. Among them were V.C. Ratliff, a descendant of the original Ratcliffe of Jefferson's early history, who became a sewing-machine salesman in four counties and a more reliable source of information and local gossip than any newspaper. Gavin Stevens returned from Heidelberg and began to assist his father, Judge Lemuel Stevens, before setting up his own law office and finally becoming county attorney. His second cousin, young Gwan Stevens, was growing up and would soon boast his University of Virginia education and his ability (more boast than fact) to hold his liquor like a man. Gavin's sister, Margaret, married Charles Mallison and bore a son, Chick, who grew up to play his part in the unfolding of Saga of the county.

The 1930s saw the influx of a number of strangers in Jefferson, and the town became the scene of some violence and at least one tragic comic episode, the burial of Addie Bundren. The Bundrens were poor-white farmers who lived
just south of the Yoknapatawpha River, but Addie Bundren had originally come from Jefferson, and her people were buried there. She had made her husband, Anse, promise to bury her with her kinsfolk when she died, and, in accordance with his promise (and a few ulterior desires of his own), Anse and the rest of the family — Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman — began the trip with Addie's body, despite the July heat and the flood-swollen river. After a nine-day journey the family and its putrescent burden arrived in Jefferson, where Addie was finally buried, and where Anse promptly acquired a new wife.

Also during the thirties Lena Grove arrived in Jefferson, having walked from Alabama, far gone in pregnancy and searching for Lucas Burch, the lover who had deserted her. She could not find her truant lover, who, under the name of Joe Brown, was sharing a cabin with another newcomer to the town, Joe Christmas, on the property of Joanna Burden, the spinster descendant of the Northern abolitionists killed by Colonel John Sartoris. Joe and Lucas peddled illicit liquor, among other things, and were regarded — as was Miss Burden — with suspicion by the townsfolk. Joe, who appeared to be white but maintained that he had Negro blood, murdered Miss Burden after she attempted to convert him and threatened him with a pistol. He promptly became the object of a manhunt by the outraged townsfolk, who forgot their suspicion of the Northern woman and accepted her as the symbol of Southern womanhood violated and murdered by a "nigger". Leading the manhunt was a young and belligerent deputy, Percy Grimm, who was descended from a Snopes girl, and who cornered, castrated, and finally killed Joe.
The thirties was a violent era for the county, as well as for Jefferson. During that time an amoral and vicious creature known as Popeye began to do business with Lee Goodwin, an illicit-liquor dealer living in the Old Frenchman Place. There Popeye murdered a simple-minded white man and raped Temple Drake, an irresponsible and provocative college girl from Jackson, who had been brought to Goodwin's place by her drunken escort, Gowan Stevens. In order to pin the murder on Goodwin, Popeye took the unresisting Temple, the only witness, to a brothel in Memphis where he could keep an eye on her. Despite the efforts of Horace Benlow to clear Goodwin, he was tried, convicted, and lynched by the angry townspeople. Temple later married a somewhat reformed and matured Gowan Stevens, all the while maintaining the fiction that she was forcibly detained in the brothel, an innocent victim of a pervert and murderer.

The forties, somewhat quieter than the years between the two wars, saw greater triumphs of Snopesism and of the progress associated with, if not actually related to, Snopes avarice: mechanization and standardization, the substitution of mechanical and commercial values for human ones. Jefferson was teeming with Snopes; Flem Snopes, who had bought the Compson property and had it subdivided, moved into the De Spain mansion and became president of the Merchants and Farmers Bank. Ironically, it was another Snopes — Mink — who, feeling his cousin had wronged him forty years before, was responsible for Flem's untimely end.

A different incident seemed to spotlight the barrier between Negro and white that had grown worse since Reconstruction. Lucas Beauchamp, old Carothers McCaslin's Negro grandson, had long irritated the townsfolk by his
independence and his refusal to accept the attitude of servility adopted by the Negroes. When he was accused of murdering one of the Gowries, a fierce hill clan of poor whites living in Beat Four, no one but a boy, Chick Mallison, and an old lady, Miss Eunice Habersham, ever thought to question Lucas' guilt, let alone try to prove him innocent.

Thus, over a period of more than a hundred years, a pattern of life in Yoknapatawpha County emerges, a whole small society is seen in terms of struggle and aspiration and development. The vitality and even the grandeur of pre-Civil War days is contrasted with the impotence and sterility of the present, but it must be remembered that the wrongs committed by the old aristocrats have been, almost literally, visited upon those that came after them. Before the coming of the white man, the Indians had considered the land to be the private property of no one, to be enjoyed in common by all. The settlers brought with them two crucial concepts – that of private property and that of slavery. It is to the outgrowths of these two concepts that almost all the evils of their society can be traced. Antebellum life, built on slavery and property, contained within it the seeds of its own ruin. Unfortunately, the positive aspects of the life – courage, gallantry, and graciousness – were also destroyed, and a residue of evils remained and persisted into the present – artificial social distinctions, greed, and a regard for the appearance, but not the fact, of respectability.

The outdoor in which Faulkner's characters live is not vaguely conceived, painted picture of nature, complete with generalized fragrant flowers and birds. It is, on the contrary, the sharply observed outdoors of northern Mississippi, with its characteristic sights, sounds and smells – the miniature suns of ripening
perimmmons, a Carolina wren singing in a swamp near a spring flowering from
the roots of a beech, the miration of the wind in the pines, “the hot still pinewiney
silence of the August afternoon” (LA.4).

The locally named plants and animals, like Faulkner’s invented characters,
inhabit in the Lafayette County, Mississippi, known as Yoknapatawpha County.
Faulkner is not, of course, literally tied to the geographical facts, and he
occasionally alters them to suit his purposes but, other things being equal, he
namely accepts the physical facts of Oxford and of Lafayette County as coinciding
with those of his Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner had no conscious
or calculated plan for this arrangement. He simply imagined his characters playing
out their roles in these familiar surroundings. Then, when he described what he
had imagined, the local scene necessarily came through.

Other changes in the actual landscape are clearly made for certain obvious
reasons. In Light in August, Joe Christmas walks from town to his cabins and his
trip and route are minutely described. Faulkner gives no street names, but the
route is clearly identifiable by any old-timer in Oxford. Joe left the barbershop at
the northern corner of the square, went down Jackson Avenue, turned left a very
short block up South sixth street to Van Burden Avenue, and then turned right on
Van Burden and followed it to the railroad station. All this is precisely described,
with accurate details on the ups and downs and even the steepness of the grades.
At the station Joe crossed the railroads tracks and went into a path leading through
a mile of woods. But Faulkner does not want a state university in his typical small
town, and so he simply removes it, letting Joe re-enter the actual landscape when
he leaves the campus, about where the university Hospital now stands.
But Faulkner did not dispense with the campus of Ole Miss entirely. He merely moved it from his Jefferson to his Oxford, which is a town some fifty miles from Jefferson, with a location which is geometrically impossible, and is, in his fiction, the seat of the university. When Horace Benlow went to the Ole Miss Campus in Sanctuary to check up on Temple Drake, he got off the train at the station and followed the route that Joe Christmas would actually have followed, up the hill on the sidewalk and on the post office, exactly as the campus was in the late 1920s.

Many other journeys are given with similar details and accuracy that of Mink Snopes from the Square to the station on Jackson Avenue, and that of Horace Benlow from the station to the Square, on Van Burden Avenue; Mink Snopes trip from Holly Springs (called Memphis Junction) to Jefferson by a devious route of road, creek bottom, and railroad; the route Joe Christmas’s attempted escape from the Square to Hightower’s house; Dilsey’s walk to church; and the Bundren family’s first view of Jefferson from the ridge of the southeast, followed by their trip on into town. In the case of the novel As I Lay Dying, it may be noted that the recognizable topography of Yoknapatawpha county and the actual Lafayette County emerge only when the Bundren family came in sight of their goal.

Some proper names are simply adopted and used. Between these are the village of Taylar eight miles south of Oxford, Hurricane Creek (some five miles to the north), Freedman Tow, Holly Springs (when it is not called Memphis Junction), Memphis itself, and the Tallahatchie River. Some other names are only slightly disguised. Yellow leaf Creek is changed to whiteleaf; Chilton’s Drug Store becomes Christian’s, and College Hill is disguised as Seminary Hill. Other names
are totally changed. Water Valley is called both Mottson and Mottstown; Buffaloe's Café is changed to Deacon's, and Grand Junction, Tennessee, is rechristened Parsham. Faulkner did not name certain places, but they can be recognized. In this connection Calvin S. Brown claims to identify many places given description in Faulkner's works. For example, Brown says "the branch that runs through the Compson place in The Sound and the Fury in Burney's Branch; the joint near the station where, in Sanctuary, Gowan Stevens first gets drunk, was named The Shack and the community at the edge of which Joanna Burden lives is St. Paul's" (10).

A great deal of the feeling of down-to-earth reality and immediacy which Faulkner's fiction produces can be attributed to his long familiarity and emotional involvement with the places where it all happens. It also proves a writer's fidelity in his work of creation, because every great literature bears the stamp of originality in the process of creation. Regarding Faulkner's closeness to his work David Minter says:

He wanted the world he was creating to possess all the salient features, all the wonderful and threatening qualities, of the world he knew—its grandeur and ruthlessness, its vulgarity and its energy—precisely because he wanted to master as well as evoke it. Towards the world that he had always seemed to him both familiar and other, both appealing and threatening, his aim was territorial and imperial. It was as though he decided to transform it in order to make it completely his own. He wanted nothing less than total possession. (80)
These feelings are strong in *Sartoris, The Sound and the Fury, and Light in
August*.

Although Gavin Stevens, one of the major characters that appears in several
novels, becomes a prototype to a limited degree, the author invents others. Even
Popeye in *Sanctuary*, diverges far from the Memphis gangsters. He is, at most, a
hint rather than a model. In a broad way, Faulkner uses local characters with a few
very loose generalizations. Faulkner seldom draws portrait, and even if he does,
very occasionally; he only takes hints.

The hints of this generalized type that he took most often, however, were
not of characters, but of incidents. He often expanded and reworked from events
that actually took place in and around Oxford. Many of them, however, were not
recorded anywhere, but narrated by some elderly persons such as Mammy
Caroline Barr and his father’s friends who drank whiskey and exchanged tales at
the clubhouse.

Faulkner does not tend to describe specific houses in Oxford. However
one can easily tell the approximate location of the house of the Benlows,
Compsons, and Sartoris’, for example, but one cannot point to any actual buildings
that inspired them. Faulkner preferred to put his invented people (characters) in
invented houses for the obvious reason that he had freedom in creating an
atmosphere. The only home of any of his important characters precisely identifiable
is that of Miss Joanna Burden’s, located past St. Paul’s, and, record says, it burned
down (as did hers) long ago.

Faulkner has faithfully recaptured the language of the Lafayette County.
When a student at the University of Virginia asked Faulkner as to how many
different dialects he distinguished in his work, he answered: "I would say there are three. The dialect, the diction of the educated semi-metropolitan white southerner, the dialect of the hill backwood Southerner and the dialect of Negro—four, the dialect of the Negro who has been influenced by the northern cities, who has been to Chicago and Detroit" (Gwynn 125). The clearest, most exact, and most literarily effective differentiation in the speech of characters is found in *Sanctuary*.

First of all we can cite Lee Goodwin, who has traveled around the world in the armed services during the war, strolled in Leavenworth, and generally has few local connections, though he has been staying at the Old Frenchman Place for four years. For having this background he speaks a sort of cosmopolitan substandard English, laced with occasional underworld terms.

Then Temple Drake, the daughter of a Jackson judge, speaks basically an upper-class Southern idiom, individualized by the college slang. The expression as "You mean old thing" and "Be a sport", used by her comes from the fashionable life style of the young girls in the late twenties.

Popeye and Tommy form an interest in pair. Both are mentally below average and both talk primarily in set phrases, but within themselves, there is also a difference. Popeye has a southern background, but the element of his speech that expresses his character is laconic and menacing, and the element drawn from his associations is the smarty contemptuous jargon of gangsters. Tommy, on the other hand, is pure rural Yoknapatawpha County man, with such set phrases as "I be dawg ef..." (He uses this three times on a single page) and "Durn my hide." His pronunciations include skeered (for scared), spile (for spoil), hit (for it),
tromp (for tramp), helt (for held), hism (for his), etc.

The uses of different dialects for different characters are essential devices of characterization, though they sometimes serve for humour or to keep the different backgrounds, social class, or attitude of two contrasting characters visible throughout a conversation or, more usually, a confrontation—without having to harp on the subject. Moreover Faulkner is also aware of the linguistic dualism as an old political device. Gavin Stevens, for example, is an excellent Greek scholar, educated at Harvard and Heidelberg, but he has never renounced his local linguistic heritage. His general speech is highly educated American with regional overtones. He is also in politics in a minor way, and Faulkner comments on his ability deliberately to speak for rural Yoknapatawpha when it suits his purposes.

Faulkner has got extraordinarily wide range of types and social classes—as wide as Chaucer’s in *The Canterbury Tales*. But as wide as the range is, the types are indigenous to his own little postage stamp of native soil. Although this society is largely pluralistic, there are nevertheless outsiders who are not and cannot be assimilated.

Fundamentally, outsiders may be either indigenous or exotic, since they are simply persons who cannot accept or be accepted by the society in which they live. A good specimen of the simple outsider from outside is Matt Levitt, the drifting Ohio auto mechanic and Golden Gloves champion to whom Gavin Stevens loses one of his invariably disastrous fist-fights. After a brief sojourn of fighting and hell raising, Levitt is fired by the garage where he works and, by a mutually acceptable agreement with the sheriff, leaves town with obscene vituperation.
Joanna Burden presents a very different case. She is the third generation from her carpetbagger grandfather and is an outsider by choice and profession. With full of mental ambivalences, she stubbornly retains attitudes of the New England of eighty years earlier and it makes her totally unassimilable in Jefferson. In fact she lives in a largely self-created past as much as does Southern outsider, Gail Hightower in the same novel.

The case of Quentin Compson's alienation is different; it is entirely internal, dating from puberty, and completely unlocal. Fundamentally, he has rejected puberty itself and maintained a quarrel against the sexual nature of mankind. He would be an alien in any community.

Both the economy and the morality of the Old South were built upon the concepts of private property and slavery, the juncture of which resulted in the formation of a society and a ruling aristocracy. The saga of Yoknapatawpha County suggests that a society built upon a precept that ignores the common humanity of mankind and establishes a morality and an economy that place social and economic codes above human values is doomed to fail. Thus Sutpen, who rejected his part Negro wife and son in order to conform to a social code that abhors miscegenation, fails to fulfill his dream of becoming a founder of a great family. Thus Quentin Compson, who places the abstract idea of honour above the reality of his sister as a human being, spells the end of the plantation economy, but the economy that replaces it is represented by men like Jason Compson and Flem Snopes, whose values are mercenary rather than humanistic, whose morality consists in adhering to the letter but not in the spirit of the law, and to whom other men are tools to be manipulated for profit.
The Covered Bridge over Yocona River in the early 1900s. Courtesy: Aston Holley
II

Faulkner was a serious writer who wanted to create work having epic grandeur. Such work is usually packed with a lot of symbolic dimensions. Ilse Dusoir Lind sees Faulkner's work as having the "capacity to lend itself to an unusually large number of interpretations, almost like human experience itself" (103). So the Faulkner legend is not merely a legend of the South but of a general plight and problem of the modern world which is in moral confusion. It does suffer from a lack of discipline, of sanction, of community of values, of a sense of mission. We don't have to go to Faulkner to find that out—or to look for a world in which self-interest and success provide the standard of conduct. It is a world in which the individual has lost his relation to society, the world of the power state in which man is a nonentity. It is a world in which man is victim of abstraction and mechanistic system. It looks back nostalgically upon various worlds of the past, Dante's world of the Catholic synthesis, Shakespeare's world of Renaissance energy, and expresses a sense of loss of traditional values and despairs in its own aimlessness and fragmentation. Any of those older worlds was a world in which men knew the art of living unlike the present state of being diffused and scattered as if creatures of different species milling around in the absence of communication and a sense of order.

It may be true that there never was a golden age in which man was simple and complete. Let us grant that. But we must grant that even with that realistic reservation man's conception of his own role and position has changed from time to time. It is unhistorical to reduce history to some dead level, and the mere
fact that man in the modern world is worried about his role and position is in itself significant.

Faulkner is also aware of the fact that if there had been any old order that had satisfied human needs, it would have survived, and it is quite sentimental to hold that an old order has been killed from the outside by certain wicked people or forces. But if the old order, he clearly indicates, did not satisfy human needs, it did afford justice, although there had been defects that showed the seeds of its own ruin. Faulkner points out that the old order, even with its bad conscience and confusion of mind, even though it failed to live up to its ideal, cherished the concept of justice. Even in terms of the curse, the old order as opposed to the new order, which is often equated with Snopesism, allowed the traditional man to define himself as human by setting up codes, ideas of virtue, however mistaken; by affirming obligations, however arbitrary; by accepting the risk of humanity. But Snopesism has abolished the concept, the very possibility of entertaining the idea of virtue. It is not a question of one idea and interpretation. It is simply that no idea of virtue is conceivable in the world in which practical success is the criterion.

Within the traditional world there had been a notion of truth, even if man could not readily define or realize his truth. We can take, for instance, a passage from “The Bear.”

‘All right,’ he said, ‘Listen,’ and read again, but only one stanza this time and closed the book and laid it on the table. ‘She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,’ McCaslin said: ‘Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair.’

‘He’s talking about a girl,’ he said.
'He had to talk about something,' McCaslin said. Then he said, 'he was talking about truth. Truth is one. It doesn't change. It covers all things which touch the heart—honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love. Do you see now?' (296-97).

The important thing, then, is the presence of the concept of truth—that covers all things which touch the heart and define the effort of man to rise above the mechanical process of life.

Faulkner may seem a bit backward-looking, but the answer lies in the notion of expressed above. The "truth" is neither of the past nor of the future. Or rather, it is of both. The constant ethical center of Faulkner's work is to be found in the glorification of human effort and human endurance, which are not confined to any one time. It is true that Faulkner's work often contains a savage attack on modernity, but the values he admires are found in our time. The point is that they are found most often in people who are outside the stream of the dominant world, the "loud world," as it is called in The Sound and the Fury. Faulkner's world is full of good people—Byron Bunch, Lucas Beauchamp, Dilsey, Ike McCaslin, Uncle Gavin, Benbow, the justice of the peace in The Hamlet, Ratliff of the same book, Hightower of Light in August—we can make a long list, probably longer list from Faulkner than from any other modern writer. In "Delta Autumn" Ike McCaslin says there are good people everywhere at all times.

It is not ultimately important whether Faulkner has presented the traditional order (Southern or other) as one would expect from a historian. If Faulkner simplifies the matter, it is done deliberately with a vision of an artist. So the important thing is that his picture of the traditional order has a symbolic function in contrast to the
modern world which he gives us. It is a way of embodying his values—his “truth.” Faulkner not only simplifies the history of the South, but also presents his characters with an artificial language—many readers may be disappointed by the convoluted and tortured language he uses in his fiction. A reader nourished on Hemingway and other similar writers may find Faulkner unreadable if he fails to find a close link between Faulkner’s theme and style.

In speaking of the relation of the past to the present, I have mentioned the curse laid upon the present, the Southern present at least, by slavery. Faulkner is not concerned ultimately with the South, but with a general philosophical view. Slavery merely happens to be the particular Southern curse. To arrive at his broader philosophical view, we can best start with his notions of Nature.

One of the most impressive features of Faulkner’s works is the vivid realization of the natural background. It is accurately observed, as in Thoreau, but observation provides only the stuff from which Faulkner’s characteristic effects are gained. It is the atmosphere that counts the infusion of feeling, the symbolic weight. Nature provides a backdrop—lyric beauty, as in the cow episode of The Hamlet; of homely charm, as in the trial scene after the spotted horses episode of the same book; of sinister, brooding force, as in the river episodes from The Wild Palms—a backdrop the human action and passion.

Nature is, however, more than a backdrop. There is an interrelation between man and nature, something not too unlike the Wordsworthian communion. At least, at moments, there is the communion, the interrelation of indestructible beauty is there, beyond man’s frailty. “God created man” McCaslin says in “Delta Autumn,” “and He created the world for him to live in and I reckon He created the
kind of world He would have wanted to live in if He had been a man” (348).

Ideally, if man were like God, as Ike McCaslin puts it, man's attitude toward nature would be one of pure contemplation, pure participation in nature's great forms and appearances, pure communion. The appropriate attitude for this communion is love, for with Ike McCaslin, who is as much Faulkner's spokesman as any other character, the moment of love is equated with godhood. But since man wasn't quite God himself, since he lives in world of flesh, he must be a hunter, user, and violator. To return to McCaslin's words in the above story:

God put them both here: man and the game he would follow and I foreknowing it, I believe He said, 'So be it.' I reckon He even foreknew end. But He said, 'I will give him his chance. I will give him warning foreknowledge too, along with the desire to follow and the power to slay. The woods and the fields he ravages and the game he devastates will be the consequence and signature of his crime and guilt, and his punishment. (349)

There is, then, a contamination implicit in the human condition—a kind of Original Sin, as it were—the sin of use, exploitation, violation. So slavery is but one of the many and constant forms of that Original Sin. But it is possible—and necessary if man is to strive to be human—to achieve some measure of redemption through love. For instance, in "The Bear," the great legend beast which is pursued from year to year to the death is also an object of love and veneration, and the symbol of virtue and the deer hunt of "Delta Autumn" is for old Ike McCaslin a ritual of renewal. Those who have learned the right relationship to nature—"the pride and humility" which Ike as a boy learns from the half-Negro, half-Indian Sam
Fathers (he learns it appropriately from an outcast)—are set over against those who do not have it. In “The Bear” General Compson speaks up to Cass McCaslin to defend the wish of the boy Ike McCaslin to stay an extra week in the woods:

You've got one foot straddled into a farm and the other foot straddled into a bank; you aint even got a good hand-hold where this boy was already an old man long before you damaged Sartorises and Edmondses invented farms and banks to keep yourselves from having to find out what this boy was born knowing and fearing too maybe but without being afraid, that could go ten miles on a compass because he wanted to look at a bear none of us had ever got near enough to put a bullet in and looked at the bear and came the ten miles back on the compass in the dark; maybe by God that’s the why and the wherewolf of farms and banks. (250)

The Sartorises and Edmondses, according to General Compson, have in their farms and banks something of the contamination; they have cut themselves off from the fundamental truth which young Ike already senses. But the real contamination is that of the pure exploiters, the apostles of abstractionism, those who have the wrong attitude toward nature and therefore toward other men.

We have a nice fable of this in the opening of *Sanctuary*, in the contrast between Benbow, the traditional man, and Popeye, the symbol of modernism. While the threat of Popeye keeps Benbow crouching by the spring, he hears a Carolina wren sing, and even under these circumstances he tries to recall the local name for it. And he says to Popeye: “And of course you dont know the name of it. I dont suppose you’d know a bird at all, without it was singing in a cage in a
hotel lounge, or cost four dollars on a plate" (2). Popeye, as we may remember, spits in the spring (he hates nature and must foul it), is afraid to go through the woods ("Through all them trees?", he demands when Benbow points out the short cut), and when an owl whisks past them in the twilight, he claws at Benbow's coat with almost hysterical fear. "'It's just an owl,'" Benbow explains. "'It's nothing but an owl'" (4).

The pure exploiters are, however, caught in a paradox. Though they may gain ownership and use of a thing, they never really have it. Like Popeye, they are impotent. For instance, Flem Snopes, the central character and villain of The Hamlet, who brings the exploiter's mentality to the quiet country of Frenchman's Bend, finally marries Eula Varner, a kind of fertility goddess or earth goddess; but his ownership is meaningless, for she never refers to him as anything but "that man"—she does not even have a name for him—and he had got her only after she had given herself willingly to one of the boys of the neighborhood. In fact, nothing can, in one sense, be "owned." Ike McCaslin, in "The Bear," says of the land which had come down to him:

It was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Grandfather's to bequeath them to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never old Ikkemotubbe's to sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation. Because it was never Ikkemotubbe's fathers' fathers' to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realized, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever,
father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing.

(256-57)

In other words, reality cannot be bought. It can only be had by love.

The right attitude toward nature and man is love. And love is the opposite of the lust for power over nature or over other men, for God gave the earth to man; we read in "The Bear," not "to hold for himself and his descendants inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth, but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood, and all the fee He [God] asked was pity a humility and sufferance and endurance and the sweat of his face for bread" (257). It is the failure of this pity that curses the earth and brings on the doom. For the rape of nature and the rape of man are always avenged. Mere exploitation without love is always avenged because the attitude which commits the crime in itself leads to its own punishment, so that man finally punishes himself. Along this line of reasoning we can read the last page of "Delta Autumn":

This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago, to millionaires' mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms live like niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals, where cotton is planted and grows man-tall in the very cracks of the sidewalks, and usury mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, Chinese and African Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together
until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares... No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution! he thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge. (364)

Despite the emphasis on the right relation to nature, and the communion with nature, the attitude toward nature in Faulkner's work does not involve a sinking into nature. In Faulkner's mythology man has "suzerainty over the earth," he is not of the earth, and it is the human virtues that count—pity and humility and endurance. If we take even the extreme case of the idiot Snopes and his fixation on the cow in The Hamlet (a scene whose function in the total order of the book is to show that even the idiot pervert is superior to Flem, a scene in which the human being appears as close as possible to the "natural" level, we find that the scene is the most lyrical in Faulkner's work: even the idiot is human and not animal, for only human desires, not animal desires, must clothe themselves in poetry. There is a humanism-naturalism opposition in Faulkner's work, and over and over again we find that the point of some story or novel has to do with the human effort to break out of the mechanical round of experience at the merely "natural" level—not just to eat, evacuate and sleep in warmth, or not just to plant cotton to buy slaves as one may say. Even when a character seems to be caught in iron ring of some compulsion the effort may be discernible. And in Quentin's attempt in The Sound and the Fury to persuade his sister Caddy, who is pregnant by one of the town boys of Jefferson, to confess that she has committed incest with him, we find among other things the idea that "the horror" of the crime and the "clean flame" of guilt would be preferable to the meaninglessness of the "loud world." More is at stake in Quentin's attitude than the snobbery of a Compson, which would prefer
incest to the notion that his sister has had to do with one of the underbred town boys.

Another important point of Faulkner’s theme is the disintegration of the Southern traditional life. For instance, Malcolm Cowley, in his fine introduction to The Portable Faulkner, says that the violence of Faulkner’s work is “an example of the Freudian method turned backward, being full of sexual nightmares that are in reality social symbols. It is somehow connected in the author’s mind with what he regards as the rape and corruption of the South.” (15)

It is true that Faulkner deals almost exclusively with the Southern scene, it is true that the conflict between past and present is a constant concern for him, it is true that the Civil War is always behind his work as a kind of backdrop, and it is true that in Faulkner’s work there is the implication that Northern arms were the cutting edge of modernism. But granting all this, one should put the emphasis not in terms of South and North, but in terms of issues common to our modern world.

Faulkner’s intention is not for creating the Southern history. For this reason he does not present the Southern society as a sociologist would present. There are many areas of inconsistency, and one will not expect him to deal with the complex issues of the Southern society. He mentions the Civil wars, the conflict between the Northerners and the Southerners, he also mentions the racial issues. But any attempt to read his fiction as social document would be an inadequate approach. In this connection David Minter says:

Since Faulkner’s fiction is not informed by any set of ideas or theories about southern history or southern society and since his methods are not those of a historian or a sociologist, it is clearly
wrongheaded to regard his Yoknapatawpha fiction as history of sociology. In their meaning his works ‘are more, and in their immediate applicatddion less, than’ southern history or southern society in microcosm. (86)

The decay of the Compsons, for example, can be viewed not merely with reference to the Southern past but to the contemporary American scene. One can read the novel as a parable of the disintegration of modern man. Individuals no longer sustained by familial and cultural unity are alienated and lost in private worlds. Caddy, born and brought up in a decadent family with no parental love and guidance goes adrift in the world, homeless and promiscuous, or Quentin, out of touch with reality, inevitably moves to his death, while Jason who thinks he has liberty to anything so long as he can keep himself clear of “the police”, repudiates any traditional tie with family members. In his article “Yoknapatawpha from a Historical Perspective”, Irving Howe, referring to The Sound and the Fury, says:

All of them together represent the sum of the loss which Faulkner measures in the history of Yoknapatawpha. In their squalor and pathos, the Compsons are the Southern patriciate in extremis. Stripped of whatever is contingent is their experience, they come to suggest a dominant quality of modern life. They are of the South, signifying its decay and shame but the decay is universal and, therefore, the same should be universal. To confine the meaning of their story to a segment of Southern life is sheer provincialism, as fatuous as an attempt to isolate a plague by drawing a line on the
map. This book is a lament for the passing of a world, not merely the world of Yoknapatawpha and not merely the South. (119-20)

The one member of the Compson household who represents a unifying and sustaining force is the Negro servant Dilsey. She tries to take care of Benjy and to give the girl Quentin the mothering she needs. In contrast to Mrs. Compson’s vanity and whining self pity, Dilsey exhibits charity and good sense. Dilsey’s poverty and her status require her to remain close to a concrete world of values, so that she is less perverted by abstraction and more honest than are most white people in recognizing what is essential and basic.

The most pathetic scene of the novel emerges when Faulkner places before us the picture of Dilsey’s old and waning body being dragged more by her will power than by physical strength trying to minister the whining Mrs. Compson who, as usual, stands at the head of the stairs and makes a hypocritical offer to come down to make the fire in the kitchen. It is true Dilsey has endured and even prevailed, though only to a limited degree, but the breakdown of the Compson family is inevitable. Dilsey knows it; while returning from the Easter Sunday service, Dilsey seems to have a vision of the inevitability; She says: “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de ending” (297). In Faulkner’s fiction Negroes are often presented to uphold the good old tradition of the Southern society. But like Dilsey’s waning vitality, the downfall of the south, for that matter, the American society as elsewhere, is inevitable.

Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County transcends the local or regional colours in themes and vision of his fictional world. Yoknapatawpha is a sounding board of Faulkner’s exploration of human experience. With his probing eyes, he observes
every attitude of human being moving back and forth in the history of human civilization. Finally, Faulkner has no obsessive interest on the saga of the Southern society. It is incidental that he took up Yoknapatawpha for his literary expression. In this connection he made a pertinent remark:

I'm inclined to think that my material, the South, is not very important to me. I just happen to know it and don’t have time in one life to learn another one and write at the same time. Though the one I know is probably as good as another, life is a phenomenon but not a novelty, the same frantic steeple chase toward nothing everywhere and man stinks the same stink no matter where in time. (Simpson 236)

Lafayette County is the chessboard on which he deploys his pieces and plays out his games. Undoubtedly, a good deal of the specific effect of his work comes from the tension between his literal setting and his high imagination. The setting keeps on influencing Faulkner’s rhetoric and keeps it from becoming superficial abstraction, while imagination and rhetoric raise the earthly factuality to a mythical level. In Faulkner’s work, therefore, there is a constant balance between the genuinely universal and the faithful recording of the native colour. Just as an artist is in need of brush and colour to draw his theme, Faulkner finds his Lafayette County as the raw-material for his thematic concerns having universal significance. Meriwether mentions the interview published in the Paris Review, in which Faulkner discussed the early history of his writing with Jean Stein saying, “Beginning with Sartoris 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,
and by sublimating the actual into apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top"(255). A writer is a part of the society and hence his foremost concern is usually to write as a responsible citizen of the society. And as he takes up to write, he draws materials from his known world, the place which he knows intimately from various angles. In this sense the saga as well as the topography of Yoknapatawpha have the symbolic dimensions that intend to deal with the common plights and predicament of human civilization.

Works Cited


