

William Faulkner: “A Man Steeped In the Soil of His Native Land”

In the preface to William Faulkner’s collection of verse, *A Marble Faun*, his friend, Phil Stone, writes:



“The author of these poems is a man steeped in the soil of his native land, a Southerner by every instinct, and, more than that, a Mississippian....He is a man of varied outdoor experience, of wide reading, of quick humor, of the usual Southern alertness and flexibility of imagination, deeply schooled in the poets and their technical trials and accomplishments, and – above all – of rigid self-honesty.”

William Faulkner is considered one of America’s great 20th century novelists. Born September 25, 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi, Faulkner dropped out of high school in 1915 and worked as a clerk in his grandfather’s Oxford, Mississippi bank. He tried to enlist in World War I, but was rejected because of his small stature. With the help of a friend, Faulkner successfully devised a plan to become admitted to the Royal Canadian Air Force by affecting a British accent and forging recommendation letters. However, the war ended before Faulkner saw any combat.

After World War I, Faulkner attended the University of Mississippi (1919-1920). He was employed as a bookstore clerk at Lord & Taylor in New York (1921) and postmaster at the University of Mississippi (1921-1924). In 1925, Faulkner worked as a roof painter, carpenter, and paper hanger in New Orleans.

Faulkner’s career as a full-time writer spanned from 1925 to his death in 1962. His early attempts at poetry led to the publication of his work in *The New Republic*. His first book, *The Marble Faun: A Collection of 19 Poems*, was issued on December 15, 1924 by The Four Seas Company of Boston, but its sales were poor.

While Faulkner was living in New Orleans, he fell in love with Helen Baird and asked her to marry him. In 1925, he gave her two small books he hand-lettered and bound: *Mayday*, and *Helen: A Courtship*, a cycle of fifteen sonnets. Faulkner and Helen did not marry; Estelle Oldham Franklin became his wife on June 20, 1929. They had two daughters, Alabama and Jill.

Taking the advice of his friend, novelist Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner wrote *Soldiers’ Pay*, a novel about the return of a Southern World War I veteran. Although it was not a commercial success, fellow Southern writer Robert Penn Warren said the book “made a profound and undefinable impression” on him. Faulkner’s second novel – this time about literary life in New Orleans - was published in 1927. It was titled *Mosquitoes*. That same year, Faulkner wrote *The Wishing Tree*, what is believed to be his only children’s story.

As Faulkner was working the night shift at a powerhouse, he wrote *As I Lay Dying*, his famous work about the nature of being. Listening to the constant hum of a dynamo, Faulkner completed the book in six weeks. It was published in 1930.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Faulkner wrote many of his finest books, including *The Hamlet*. However, they brought in little money, so Faulkner was forced to work in Hollywood as a screenwriter. Faulkner was never happy there, so he left as soon as he had earned enough money to pay his bills. Some of his screenplays include “Today We Live” (1933), starring Joan Crawford and Gary Cooper.

Faulkner’s 1948 novel, *Intruder in the Dust*, deals with the trial of Lucas Beauchamp, a black farmer accused of murdering a white man, who is cleared through the efforts of black and white teenagers and a spinster from a respected Southern family. Faulkner wrote it as his response as a Southern writer to the racial problems facing the South. The next year, MGM turned *Intruder in the Dust* into a film, paying Faulkner film rights of \$50,000. The film was shot in Faulkner’s home town of Oxford, Mississippi.

In 1949, Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for Literature “for his powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel.” On December 10, 1950, he delivered his acceptance speech in Stockholm. A public outcry arose when Faulkner was awarded the prize because some thought he promoted immorality. This speech caused many to change their opinion of him. Soon, he was regarded as a moral hero.

Faulkner received the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for *A Fable* in 1955. Considered his crowning achievement, it is the result of nine years of work, from its conception in December 1944 to its completion in November 1953. Set in 1918 France, it tells the story of soldiers and civilians alike. Described by its publisher, Random House, Inc., as a “modern Faulknerian version of the week of the Passion,” this symbolic tale “reflects contemporary man’s conflicts within himself, his aspirations and anguish and hope of final redemption.”

On November 10, 1955, the Southern Historical Association assembled in Memphis for its 21st annual meeting. The first general session of the conference focused on “The Segregation Decisions.” Faulkner presented the concluding paper of the session, titled “American Segregation and the World Crisis.” In it, he expressed concern about his native South’s differing racial attitudes from the rest of the world and their possible effect.

Spending most of his career in his native South, Faulkner was also writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia from 1957 to 1962. He also contributed poems, short stories, and articles to magazines and newspapers, including *New Republic*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Scribner’s* and *Sports Illustrated*.

Faulkner was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1939) and the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1948). Among the many awards he received are the Nobel Prize for Literature (1949); the William Dean Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1950) and the National Book Award (1951) for *Collected Stories*.

In 1963, Faulkner won the Pulitzer prize for fiction for *The Reivers: A Reminiscence*, what turned out to be his final novel. This comic classic tells the story of eleven-year-old Lucius Priest, who “borrowed” his grandfather’s automobile in 1905 and traveled with two friends from Jefferson, Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee. The account of their exciting journey rivals the tale of the unbelievable adventures awaiting the reivers (“robbers” and “raiders”) in Memphis.

Less than three months before his death, Faulkner visited the United States Military Academy. On the night of April 19, 1962, he read excerpts from his not-yet-published novel, *The Reivers*, and answered questions about his own work and literature in general. The next morning, he met with cadets in two advanced literature courses.

Faulkner died July 6, 1962 in Byhalia, Mississippi. Southern writer William Styron, a practitioner of the same style of fiction writing that was developed by William Faulkner, wrote a tribute to Faulkner titled *As He Lay Dead, a Bitter Grief*. Originally published in *Life Magazine* in 1962, it includes Faulkner’s poem, “My Epitaph.”

Each of Faulkner’s novels has been translated into at least one other language; several have translated into as many as 13 languages. Many of his works have been adapted for the stage and screen.