

Faulkner's depiction of human nature  
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## **William Faulkner's depiction of human nature**

The Quest Club asked me to explain how William Faulkner depicts human nature. Are you kidding me? What did I do to deserve this topic?

And so, I read and researched and read and researched. And here's how I think Faulkner depicts human nature.

Faulkner addresses universal themes about life, and in the process, shows despair, loss, sorrow, fear and deprivation through the most vibrant and wrenching dialog I've ever read--and sometimes through the most annoying stream-of-consciousness writing I've ever read. Faulkner makes his reader work to understand his message and books. But that's because life is hard, as he has witnessed in his early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mississippi. Most people, especially proud and formerly powerful, rich people, have a hard time accepting change and loss, much less adapting to it. And then there's the issue of race. Faulkner explored this issue in new and – surprise! – complex ways through *Light in August* (and other books), in which his protagonist, the orphan Joe Christmas, looks 100 percent white, but is told that an ancestor was black. And so, he goes through life never knowing who is, and always smashing into race issues – which he generally instigates. Through Joe Christmas, Faulkner shows the mortal weight of racism.

And no one I've ever read can portray evil like Faulkner did in *Sanctuary*. He uses rape, sham trials and a naïve, rich, virgin party girl to explore evil in more layers than a big Vidalia onion.

And then in *As I Lay Dying*, his story of the bumbling and neurotic Bundren family's journey to bury the family matriarch, Faulkner shows how a family exploits, deals and doesn't deal with death and each other. In fact, one of my favorite existential passages comes from "Dying," but you'll have to wait for that until I dive into this book more deeply.

But before you ask the Eddie Merlot staff to hide all the knives, let me assure you that Faulkner discovers love and hope in his final books, especially his last one, *The Reivers*. This lovely tale, that has been compared to Twain's Huckleberry Finn, captures the innocence of an 11-year-old who sees the dark side of the world, and finds hope and a guide forward from his wise grandfather.

In short, Faulkner wrote amazing, profound, difficult and timeless stuff. Shall we dig in?

Faulkner's south was not a happy place; despair and loss replaced past glory days. Just consider that in 1860, the 12 most prosperous counties in the United States were beneath the Mason-Dixon Line, with the highest per capita income in Adams County,

Mississippi. By the 1920s, Mississippi had the lowest per capita income of \$126, compared to \$500 in the rest of the south, and \$1,000 in the United States as a whole, according to Andre Bleikasten's *William Faulkner, a Life Through Novels*

And this is where Faulkner lived most of his life and where he based many novels. He even created the fictional Mississippi county, Yoknapatawpha, and its county seat, Jefferson, as the setting for many novels. As Joseph Urgo and Ann Abadie noted in *Faulkner and his Contemporaries*, Faulkner "was ensconced in his 'postage stamp of native soil,' and the world of letters within which he created his masterpieces."

After decades of lethargy, the South was beginning to wake up in the 1920s, which gave rise to new voices and the Southern Renaissance – lasting until the mid 1950s. However, biographer Bleikasten noted that "what sets Faulkner apart from his Southern contemporaries (such as Thomas Wolfe and Robert Penn Warren) and places him above them is that in his greatest books, the fictional imagination soars above nostalgia and becomes instead an implacable questioning of the South."

Later, Faulkner would claim the South was only a backdrop to the "old familiar story of the human heart in conflict with itself." These "old familiar stories" produced a Nobel Prize in literature and two Pulitzer Prizes.

Not bad for a guy who was a troubled genius, drunkard, liar, and cheat.

William Cuthbert **Falkner**, born Sept. 25, 1897, was the first of four sons of Maud (Butler) **Falkner** and Murray Cuthbert Falkner in New Albany, Mississippi. Faulkner's birth name had no "u," which Faulkner added early in his career. Explanations for the altered name are hoping to sound more British (Faulkner sometimes spoke in a British accent) and to ensure that others pronounced his name with as little of a Mississippi dialect as possible. During this presentation, I will pronounce Faulkner with the "u" throughout.

In 1902, the family, moved to the larger town of Oxford, Mississippi, which delighted the young Faulkner and where he lived most of his life.

Faulkner's father, Murray, launched a series of failed business ventures before serving as secretary and business manager for the University of Mississippi. Like his father, son Billy drank in excess, was hotheaded, leaned toward melodrama and loved to ride, hunt and fish.

Faulkner's mother, Maud, was well-born, although her family came upon hard times. In addition to being a fervent Baptist, Maud was independent, intelligent, determined, and loved the fine arts, except music. She taught her sons to read before attending school at age 8, using such works as Grimm's Fairy Tales, Shakespeare, Balzac, Dickens, and Hugo to hone their skills.

Never a great student, Faulkner lost interest in school around age 10, spending more time reading, writing and drawing. As a teen, Maud observed her son's poor posture and made Faulkner wear a corset for two years to straighten his back and posture. Later, one of his mistresses noted that Faulkner "walked like a southern gentleman, with his torso thrust forward and the upper part leaned backward."

Wearing a corset did not trouble Faulkner nearly as much as his 5-foot-4-inch frame. Some observers mused that Faulkner's insecurity about his stature may have contributed to his love of aviation and horseback riding.

In 1912, Faulkner began making regular visits to Estelle Oldham at her family's nearby home. The Oldhams were wealthy, loved the arts, and entertained often among Oxford's social elite, to which Faulkner's middle-class family never received invitations. When Faulkner and the Oldham's beautiful oldest daughter became romantically involved, Estelle's parents forbade their marriage because Faulkner was not of the appropriate social class and wealth.

But not to worry. Estelle divorced her husband in April of 1929, and Faulkner and Estelle married that July. And they lived unhappily ever after. Both drank in excess and quarreled so viciously that one or both often showed up to events with scratches and bruises. But they never divorced, despite Faulkner's many long affairs.

In 1914, Faulkner met life-long friend, Phil Stone, a student at Yale and four years Faulkner's senior. Stone would be a steady rudder for much of Faulkner's life, helping him through dangerous drinking binges and introducing him to influential people.

It was Stone who urged Faulkner to leave Oxford in 1918, where he was becoming known as a drunkard whose identities varied widely from a dandy to a hobo. The pair went to New Haven, Connecticut, where Faulkner found work at the Brickstone Book Shop and met and befriended young poet Stephen Vincent Benet and older poet Robert Hillyer. Faulkner returned to Oxford in several weeks because that's where he felt most comfortable.

World War I was winding down by now, and Faulkner wanted to be part of the war effort. The U.S. Army rejected his enlistment request, and so he went to Canada where he was accepted in the Canadian Royal Air Force. When Faulkner returned home six months later, he boasted of combat missions, injuries and even walked with a fake limp from a war wound – although RAF records show Faulkner never saw a day of combat.

As biographer Bleikasten noted, "Throughout his life, Faulkner applied himself to rewriting history, to hide his faults. He played tricks with the truth... in order to breathe easier."

Faulkner worked many jobs, attended the University of Mississippi for about a year and had several poems published.

His periodic screenwriting work in Hollywood paid many bills from 1934 to 1951. Hollywood recruited Faulkner and other novelists to add prestige to their studios and credits. His writing credit appeared on about half a dozen films, and he is credited for much of the dialog in Bogart and McCall's "The Big Sleep" and "To Have and Have Not." Faulkner *finally* did not need money by the mid 1940s, but returned to Hollywood for the celebrity and to see his "Hollywood mistress." (When this mistress got married, he got blind drunk, was taken to the hospital and needed six weeks to dry out and rehabilitate.)

Winning the Nobel Prize in 1949 in literature "for his powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel," finally launched Faulkner into the American spotlight; he was already highly acclaimed in Europe.

Interestingly, Faulkner was able to clean up his act enough to be an effective, erudite and charming ambassador for President Eisenhower's People to People Program, traveling to various countries to advance the president's efforts to build international understanding.

Faulkner became the writer-in-residence at several colleges, with his longest and favorite stint at the University of Virginia. He even purchased a home there – splitting his time between Oxford and Charlottesville--and bequeathed all his manuscripts to the William Faulkner Foundation of the University of Virginia.

After 1960, Faulkner had periodic hospital stays, some of them due to falls from a horse. His last of several falls occurred in June of 1962; he died the next month on July 6 of a coronary occlusion. He was 64 years old.

By the time Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury* in 1928, he had written several novels and introduced Yoknapatawpha County to his readers. But *The Sound and the Fury* set him apart as a novelist who expanded the modernist form and told complicated, difficult stories in new ways, using stream-of-consciousness, inner dialog and sculpting complex characters.

This novel also launched four years of prolific writing that produced five novels and 40 short stories – two-thirds of which were printed. (In his early years, Faulkner often made more money on short stories for popular magazines than from novels.) Other novels from these amazing years include *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, *Light in August* and *Sartoris*.

Faulkner borrowed the title for *Sound and Fury* from this soliloquy by Shakespeare's Macbeth:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale*

*Told by an idiot, full of **sound and fury**,  
Signifying nothing.*

This novel concerns the Compson family of Jefferson, Mississippi, who is struggling with its lost social status and family troubles. Faulkner breaks the novel into four chapters with four distinct voices. Each chapter occurs on a different day, with the first three chapters narrated in first person by one of the three Compson sons: "Benjy" a 33-year-old with severe intellectual disabilities (Shakespeare's "idiot"); Quentin, a suicidal student at Harvard; and Jason, a cynical, selfish, failed businessman. The fourth chapter, written in third person, mainly features Dilsey, the matriarch of the servants, ever loyal to the Compsons and a woman of strength and faith.

The book ends in tragedy: Benjy continues to cry and wander, Quentin commits suicide, Jason loses lots of money -- and Dilsey celebrates Easter Sunday and keeps the household running. Throughout, Mother Caroline Compson whines and makes pleas from her bedroom.

Faulkner uses long strands of stream-of-consciousness, jumps around in time with little or no warning, and introduces new characters before he explains who they are or why they matter. And in the process, he created a new novel form that critics loved and the public shunned. Meanwhile, novels by Hemingway, Steinbeck and Wolfe were flying off the shelves.

A story goes that a critic once told Faulkner that he had read *The Sound and the Fury* three times and still could not understand it. To which Faulkner replied, "Then read it a fourth."

The once-wealthy Compsons who are filled with denial, mourning, despair, anger, hubris and irresponsibility, are a stark reflection of Faulkner's dying South,

The first chapter takes place April 7, 1928, and is narrated by Benjy, the son with intellectual disabilities, who sees no past and no future. He is always in the present, and spends much of his time wandering and crying. Benjy can't talk, awkwardly confronts a woman and is subsequently castrated. Bleikasten explained that "Benjy's desperate attempts to communicate and express his sexuality are replaced (in chapter two) by Quentin's feverish effusiveness and sexual uncertainties."

The second chapter takes place 18 years earlier on June 2, 1910, at Harvard, narrated by the troubled Quentin, who is a freshman there.

This segment begins when Quentin's father, Jason Compson III, gives Quentin his grandfather's watch before Quentin leaves for Harvard. Dad's despair drips from his words: "I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; ... I give it to you **not** that you may remember a time, but that you might forget it ...and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won. They are not even fought. The field only

reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.”

Quentin smashes the watch early in the chapter. Although he has ruined its face, the clock keeps ticking – reminding Quentin of man’s infinite folly.

As Quentin roams the streets of Cambridge, he is tormented by worry and incestuous thoughts of Caddy, his rebellious younger sister. Her sexual promiscuity horrifies him so much that he seeks counsel from his alcoholic father. Good old dad tells Quentin: “In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it.... It was men who invented virginity not women.”

There are long streams of consciousness as Quentin torments himself with worries and allusions about Caddy, who had become pregnant but was unsure of the father.

Toward the chapter’s end, Quentin wanders like a sleepwalker where everything comes undone. There is no punctuation in the segment I’m about to read. “I seemed to be lying neither asleep now awake  
looking down a long corridor of gray halflight where all stable things have become shadowy paradoxical  
all I had done shadows  
all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse  
mocking without relevance inherit themselves  
with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed...”

Quentin’s behavior seems to assert the past is never dead and it may not even be past. That time is a present that carries in it all past and all future, therefore time is nothing – and the “nothing” trumps everything, which leads Quentin to the non-time of death. Unlike Benjy, who stays in the present, Quentin cannot manage the present or past, and so there is no future.

In his appendix to *Sound and Fury*, Faulkner offers a study of each main character. He writes this about the Compson daughter, Caddy, who is never a narrator, but looms throughout much of the book. “Doomed and knew it, ... Loved her brother (Quentin) despite him, loved not only him but in him that bitter prophet and inflexible corruptless judge of what he considered the family’s honor and doom... accepting the fact that he must value above all not her but the virginity of which she was custodian and on which she placed no value whatever ... which to her was no more than a hangnail.”

The third chapter takes place April 6, 1928, a day before the first chapter. Jason, the youngest son and favorite of Mother Compson, begins by complaining about Quentin, who Caddy’s daughter and who is named after her late uncle who killed himself at Harvard. Caddy has left her daughter Quentin to be raised by the Compson family. Jason says, “Once a bitch, always a bitch, what I say. I says you’re lucky if her playing out of school is all that worries you. (*he yells to his mother*) I says she ought to be down

there in the kitchen right now, instead of painting her face .... And Mother says, "But to have the school authorities think that I have no control over her, that I can't..."

And we're off and running with hapless Jason and his conniving niece, Quentin.

Jason's failures, hubris and cynicism mirrors the mood of the south in that he wants to swagger about with a clout and community standing that no longer exists. He is a loudmouth who teems with ignorance about the changing city and country around him – and takes thoughtless and impulsive actions. In the end, his niece outsmarts him as she steals thousands of dollars and runs away with a carnival worker. Jason is left helpless, as the money Quentin stole is the cash her mother Caddy sent for her wellbeing and which Jason hid away.

The final chapter takes place on April 8, 1928. There is a new lightness to the tone, with Dilsey, the faithful, oldest servant, in the spotlight. Quentin, Caddy's daughter, has just run away, and it's Easter Sunday. The preacher's powerful sermon discusses the concept of redemption and that the past lives on and is in the present. Sound familiar? Somehow, Dilsey can bear the past and deals with the present.

When Dilsey picks up a national magazine and sees a photo of Caddy on the arm of a Nazi officer, Faulkner writes: "Yes, she thought, crying quietly, that was it, she didn't want to see it, because she knows Caddy doesn't want to be saved, hasn't anything anymore worth being saved or nothing worth being lost than she can lose." Dilsey doesn't show the magazine to anyone and continues to run the household with her steadying hand.

The novel ends with Benjy and a servant walking around and looking in a field – just as the novel began. Nothing has changed amidst all the sound and fury.

But *Sound and the Fury* is so much more than a reflection of the dismal, despondent south. Most of us yearn to stay in the present like Benjy, and not bemoan the past or fear the future as did the suicidal Quentin. And when hubris, greed and impulsiveness take hold, as they did for Jason, there can be no good end. But Dilsey shows us a way through with her steady hand, loyalty and faith.

After this rather in-depth look at *Sound and Fury*, I will offer shorter discussions about how Faulkner depicts human behavior in the four other novels that I read.

*Sanctuary* will mainly concern evil and amoral behavior.

In *As I Lay Dying*, the discussion centers on how a family deals--or not--with death and loss.

Key themes in *Light in August* will be racism, with a few comments on marginalization.

And finally, I will examine grace and responsibility from *The Reivers*.

In 1929, when Faulkner's publisher received the manuscript for *Sanctuary*, he responded, "Good God, I can't publish this. We'd both be in jail." But the publisher changed his mind and *Sanctuary* reached the public in 1931. Faulkner, maintained he only wrote *Sanctuary* to make money. "To me it is a cheap idea, because it was deliberately conceived to make money. I have been writing books for about five years, which got published and not bought." His plan worked. *Sanctuary* sold more copies than any previous book and became a movie.

Faulkner described the book as "the most horrific tale," His father campaigned against its publication.

In *Sanctuary*, Temple Drake, a freshman at Ole Miss, and a rich, white party girl, shares the spotlight with Popeye, an amoral short Black man. For the virgin Temple, life is a party until it's not. The story takes place during prohibition – although booze flows fast. When her date, an alcoholic, runs out of booze, he takes her to a rundown home to get whiskey, where Temple is held captive. The home is full of moonshiners who display varying degrees of violence and amorality. The story proceeds with Popeye raping Temple with a corn cob because he is impotent. Popeye murders a white man, but another black man is charged. Temple testifies against the innocent man, who is quickly convicted and lynched by a mob. Popeye moves Temple to a brothel in Memphis, where her corruption fully matures. Popeye is eventually convicted and lynched for a crime he did not do. The book ends with Temple, who has been rescued by her powerful, rich father, breezily touring Europe with him and finding her sanctuary.

Horace Benbow, the attorney who represents the innocent man, captures the essence of the story's evil: "Perhaps it is upon the instant that we realize, admit, that there is a logical pattern to evil, that we die, he thought, thinking of the expression at once seen in the eyes of a dead child, and of other dead: the cooling indignation, the shocked despair fading, leaving two empty globes in which the motionless world lurked profoundly in miniature."

Bleikasten maintains *Sanctuary* holds no innocence. "The ugliness of vice does not serve here to act as a foil to the luster of virtue. In Faulkner's books, no one is innocent."

Well then, let's leave evil and move along to *As I Lay Dying*, often heralded as Faulkner's second masterpiece. Faulkner wrote *Dying* in 1929, while working the overnight shift at the University of Mississippi power plant. He was still penniless and needed to support his family. He claims to have written the book in six weeks, "and never changed a word." Once again, Faulkner derives the title from a classic: in this case from Homer's *Odyssey*, when Agamemnon tells Odysseus, "As I lay dying, the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyelids as I descended into Hades."



In *Dying*, the bungling, bickering Bundrens do not descend into Hades. But they sure take a long time to transport the dead family matriarch to Jefferson, where she has purchased a burial plot.

As with *Sound and Fury*, critics called *Dying* a “*tour de force*” and hailed Faulkner as a pioneer for his use of stream of consciousness and inner monologues. Like his contemporaries James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Faulkner was lauded as a great writer of the modernist style, who was reinventing the novel.

Bleikasten explains that “the multiple adventures, dramatic and comical, of the Bundren’s mad escapade, are recounted ... under a torrid sun, torrential rain, crossing a flooded river and putting out a fire. And then, in the middle of it all, there is a cumbersome corpse, starting to stink.”

So how do some of the Bundrens of *Dying* behave?

The new widower acts with total self-interest. Upon his wife’s death, he proclaims, “God’s will be done ... Now I can get them teeth,” which he can purchase in Jefferson, where the family is headed.

The oldest son, builds his mother’s coffin and is stoic on the journey to Jefferson as his father tries to set his oldest son’s broken leg in cement. The son lies tied atop of the coffin with his “cemented leg” the rest of the journey until they find a doctor in Jefferson.

The youngest son declares “My mother is a fish,” after floating the coffin across a flooded river. Eating fish now becomes a form a transubstantiation.

In *Dying*, Faulkner delights Sartre, Camus and other existentialists for such passages as the one below, from son Darl.

“I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not.... I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel (his half-brother) and me, that are not asleep. And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not. Yet the wagon *is*, because when the wagon is *was*, Addie Bundren (his now dead mother) will not be. And Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so, if I am not emptied yet, I am *is*.”

Darl eventually sets a barn on fire, and is taken to an insane asylum at the story’s end. After all, nothing ties Darl to life and there is nothing to help him adapt to it.

Through dark comedy, philosophical musings, greed and personal confusion, Faulkner shows how this family behaves in times of grief, change and daily challenges – like those around him in the changing south.

Faulkner is often considered one of the foremost early writers about race in the United States, which he addresses most directly in *Light in August*.

Bleikasten notes that “The book is without a doubt his most trenchant critique of Southern order, along with *Absalom, Absalom!* (and) is a veritable indictment of a closed and rigid, racist patriarchal society based entirely on division, repression and exclusion.”

*Light in August* primarily centers on two strangers, one of whom is Joe Christmas, a man who looks white, but believes he is part black.

Joe Christmas, an orphan, is never comfortable in either the white or black world, and goes through his short life as a solitary man who is often violent and never finds peace. Early in the novel, Christmas asks: “Just when do men that have different blood in them stop hating one another?”

Christmas has a brutal sexual relationship with Joanna Burden, the daughter of a former abolitionist and a staunch advocate for civil rights. Both have racial obsessions with different origins. Joanna says: “Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. ... The curse of the black race is God’s curse. But the curse of the white race is the Black man who will be forever God’s chosen own because God once cursed him.”

After Joe Christmas murders Joanna Burden and burns down her house, Faulkner shares Christmas’s inner thoughts. “They all want me to be captured, and then when I come up ready to say here I am yes I would say here I am I am tired. I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs.”

Faulkner was a civil rights advocate to a point. He supported segregated schools, but thought blacks should be integrated slowly so they could be more fully educated first. Like the characters in many of his novels, he continued to use the N word. However, Faulkner wrote letters to the editor objecting to the execution of Willie McGee, who was controversially accused of raping a white woman. In 1955, while in Rome, he released a statement disdaining the murder of Emmet Till in Mississippi. But like the south around him, Faulkner’s view of the race issue was complicated and inconsistent.

And finally, just a few words about his last novel, *The Reivers*, an old Scottish word meaning thieves or cattle raiders.

Faulkner wrote this final chestnut in 1961, a year before his death, and has lots of fun with his characters. It’s as if he has finally opened himself up to levity, silliness and joy. The book’s narrator, Lucius Priest, now an old man, tells a tale from 1912 when he was 11 years old. Boon, an unreliable, big-hearted white man and family farm worker, talks the young Lucius into helping him steal his grandfather’s car so they can explore the big city of Memphis. The crafty black servant, Ned McCaslin, stows away in the car. The

story takes hysterical twists and turns, where Ned trades the car for a race horse and wins the car back--with money--after a couple of horse races. Meanwhile, Lucius is exposed to lust, theft, gambling and violence, and is sickened by the human depravity he discovers.

When Lucas returns, he expects a whipping for his shenanigans. But instead, his grandfather offers wisdom and responsibility. Lucas explains his anguish and asks his grandfather: "What can I do?" "Live with it," Grandfather said. "Live with it? You mean, forever? Not ever to get rid of it? Never? I can't. Don't you see I can't?"

"Yes, you can," his grandfather said. "You will. A gentleman always does. A gentleman can live through anything he faces. A gentleman accepts the responsibility of his actions and bears the burden of their consequences, even when he did not himself instigate them but only acquiesced to them, didn't say no though he knew he should."

So how and why did Faulkner come up with all these complex stories and unique characters? Faulkner offers this explanation in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1950.

**Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself, which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.**

**... He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed – love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.**

And through his unblinking, sometimes merciless writing, Faulkner vividly depicts how humans behave when problems of the human heart are in conflict.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.