20th Century American Literature

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**William Faulkner**

**Lecture Notes**

1. **Biography and Literary Information**
   1. Childhood
      1. Born in New Albany, Mississippi in 1897. He later moved to Oxford, Mississippi. His parents were Murray Charles Faulkner and Maud (Butler) Faulkner. He grew up as the eldest son of four brothers.
      2. He grew up in one of the poorest states, which at the time had 25% of families below the poverty line.
      3. He hoped to aspire to be like his great-grandfather who was also a writer.
   2. As a Young Man
      1. He was quarterback on his high school football team; however, never graduated.
      2. Although he never obtained his degree in college he studied for a period of time at University of Mississippi.
      3. He had always dreamed of becoming a pilot in the army however was declined because of his height. ( 5’5”)
      4. He later became a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force.
      5. He remained in this Canadian Air Force through World War I but never saw flying time in combat. His lack of war experience was a major difference between him and many other writers from this period.
   3. Personal and Professional Experiences
      1. Worked as a scoutmaster for the Oxford Boy Scout troop as well as a bank clerk.
      2. Worked as a postmaster at the University of Mississippi but was fired for reading on the job.
      3. Faulkner only worked these jobs to make money so he could devote his time to his true passion of writing.
      4. He became a prolific writer, producing many successful novels, stories, and screenplays during his long career.
      5. Married his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham who developed a drug addiction, which affected their marriage. They had three children together.
      6. His hard drinking during his life also affected his body and mental performance.
   4. Adulthood
      1. For a span of twenty years he worked in Hollywood writing several screen plays like *Today We Live* (1933) and *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955) and producing many novels and short stories
      2. He later worked in Hollywood with Howard Hawks, a movie director who became a friend.
      3. Hawks once said after Hemingway turned down the offer to work with him, "I'll get Faulkner to do it; he can write better than you can anyway.”
   5. Influences on his writing
      1. Although he spent the majority of his life in Mississippi, the places Faulkner lived influenced his stories..
      2. He often wrote about Southern social dynamics, specifically the inequality felt by African Americans.
      3. Architecture also played a role in his writing as he was obsessive with “restoring his own house, naming his books after buildings and depicting them carefully.”
   6. Faulkner wrote of…
      1. Stories that corresponded with his own life, like his problem with drinking, and his fantasies, including a strange obsession with rape, incest, suicide and greed.
      2. His characters usually followed the “historical growth and subsequent decadence of the South.”
      3. Created an imaginary place called Yoknapatawpha County, a fictional region of Mississippi, along with its inhabitants over thirty years of writing.
   7. Themes used by Faulkner
      1. Faulkner was passionate about his writing, once stating “Everything goes by the board: honor, pride, decency, security, happiness, all, to get the book written, if a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate.”
      2. Yoknapatawpha County was modeled after Lafayette County. This Chickasaw Indian term meant “water passes slowly through flatlands.”
      3. This place was used to show the decay of the old south through the Sartoris and Compson families.
      4. He often offers his own moral evaluation of the relationship and the problems between African-American and white people.
      5. Racial prejudice, class division, and family curses were recurring themes.
   8. Techniques
      1. He used the manner of “distortion of time through the use of inner monologue” as seen in *As I Lay Dying.*
      2. His sentence structure consists of long, often hypnotic, sentences consisting of carefully chosen words.
      3. He is often noted for withholding important detailing or referring to people or events which the reader does not learn of until much later into the story.
      4. At times he played with using page long sentences or gave the reader details only meaningful at the end of the story.
      5. He also experienced with the stream of consciousness, multiple point of views and time-shifts within the narration.
      6. His stories varied from the traditional storytelling style to use of snapshot or collages to tell the stories.
   9. Awards
      1. William Faulkner won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949.
      2. He donated his award to establish a fund to support and encourage new fiction writers eventually being called the PEN/Faulkner Award of Fiction.
      3. Faulkner came in second in Ellery Queen *Mystery Magazine* Award contest.
      4. Two Pulitzer Prizes for [*A Fable*](http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/n-fabl.html) and [*The Reivers*](http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/n-reiv.html).
      5. O. Henry Short Story Prize.
      6. After he died he was awarded a National Book Award for his Collected Stories.
   10. The End of His Life
       1. Faulkner died July 6th, 1962 after suffering from a coronary occlusion.
       2. Up to his death he worked as a Writer-In-Residence at the University of Virginia in 1957.
       3. The United States Postal Service issued a first-class 22-cent stamp commemorating his life and stint as a postmaster.
2. **Faulkner as Modernist writer:**
   1. Joseph C. Murphy has said that Faulkner represents many of the characteristics of a Modernist writer, incuding:
      1. "experimenting with narrative structures, temporal frameworks, narrative voices, and symbols;
      2. exploring inner consciousness as a major theme;
      3. adapting the abstract methods of modern painting to literature;
      4. embracing communities steeped in tradition and history (both Western and “primitive” traditions) as a relief from the upheavals and alienation of modernity."
   2. Causality is an important idea in Modernist literature, and perhaps more than any other writer Faulkner sought to explore this idea in his writing.
3. **Small Group Discussion:**
   1. In the story you have just finished reading (“A Rose for Emily”) the action is told from the perspective of the people of the town. What they think about who Miss Emily is, who she should be, and what she represents to them, ends up driving her insane.
      1. Do you think that the way we speak in private with other individuals is different from the way we speak in public forums (chat rooms, internet comments, etc.)?
      2. Have you ever felt that the expectations of other people have limited your freedom and your ability to find your own happiness as an individual?