

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

andrewgoldstone.com/e20fic25

Professor Andrew Goldstone (andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu)

Office hours: Mondays 12:30–1:30 in Murray 040A

TA: Cassie Schiffman (cassie.schifman@rutgers.edu)

Office hours: Thursdays 12:30–1:30 in Murray 101A

October 27, 2025. Faulkner (2).

midterm practice

My mother is a fish.

Identify the source text, author, and who is speaking (2 points). Explain the metaphor (1 point). Explain the significance of this use of metaphor. (1 point).

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William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. Vardaman is speaking. His mother is a fish because he has just caught and killed a fish, and she, like the fish, is dead and beginning to decay. The metaphor, which is not easy to understand, indicates Vardaman's thought process as he tries, with difficulty, to grasp his mother's death. It contributes to the novel's combination of grotesque humor and pathos.

review

- ▶ many narrators, each one layered: hypocrisy, deception, irony
 - ▶ opacity of everyday life: “it,” “he,” “they”
 - ▶ so Faulkner shows it from many sides
- ▶ telepathy: knowing without words
 - ▶ [Tull:] It's like he had got into the inside of you, somehow. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes. (125)
 - ▶ [Darl:] And when I saw him [Cash] I knew that he knew what it was. (133)
 - ▶ [Darl:] And then I knew that I knew. (136) (Knew what?)
 - ▶ [Darl:] “That pillow was longer than him,” Cash says. (144)
- ▶ anachrony: don't expect things to be in order here
 - ▶ Addie dies at least twice
 - ▶ Darl's memory of Jewel earning the money to buy his horse

review: dialect/idiolect

- ▶ the novel represents non-Standard speech in both dialogue and narration
 - ▶ link to oral storytelling: folktales, tall tales
 - ▶ and to regionalist fiction (norms: comedy or sober documentation)
- ▶ against stereotype, dignity and complexity
 - ▶ archaisms: “I done help him” (33)
 - ▶ biblical language: “‘The Lord giveth,’ we say.” (86): “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away” (Job 1:21, King James Version)
- ▶ but “dialect” does not explain locutions like Dewey Dell’s “care-kin” (26)
 - ▶ Faulkner invents: see 266n. on “pussel-gutted”
 - ▶ and then see 13 (Jewel), 40 (Darl)

Faulknerlect (I): Vardaman and the horse

It is dark. I can hear wood, silence: I know them....It is as though the dark were resolving him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components—snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of a co-ordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an *is* different from my *is*. (56)

Faulknerlect (2): Cash made it on the bevel

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam....
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
6. Except.
7. A body is not square like a crosstie.
8. Animal magnetism.
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on a bevel.

A supposed force or emanation to which the action of mesmerism is attributed.

OED s.v. “animal magnetism,” n., 2010.

Faulknerlect (3): brrrr

[Tull:] And the next morning they found him in his shirt tail, laying asleep on the floor like a felled steer, and the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash's new auger broke off in the last one. Whey they taken the lid off they found that two of them had bored on into her face.

If it's a judgment, it aint right. Because the Lord's got more to do than that. Because the only burden Anse Bundren's ever had is himself....I think to myself he aint that less of a man or he couldn't a bore himself this long....

Cora said, "I have bore you what the Lord God sent me." (73)

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discussion: Faulknerlect? (4)

- ▶ How does language work in the river crossing? (141–49)
 - ▶ Catalogue the *various* kinds of language at work in this episode.
 - ▶ How are the bare events being reshaped (by Darl, by Faulkner)?

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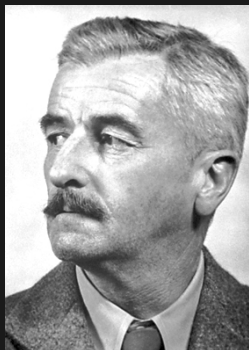
It as though the space between us were time: an irrevocable quality.
(146)

Cash tried but she fell off and Darl jumped going under he went under
and Cash hollering to catch her... (150)

It wasn't on a balance. (165)

William Cuthbert Falkner

- 1897 b. Mississippi
 - 1918 joins RAF as “Faulkner” in Toronto
 - 1919 briefly at U. of Mississippi as student
 - 1924 *The Marble Faun* (Boston: Four Seas):
long poem
 - 1925 travels in Europe
 - 1926 invents Yoknapatawpha in early work
 - 1929 *The Sound and the Fury* (New York:
Cape & Smith)
 - 1929 works nights at Ole Miss power plant
 - 1929 composes *As I Lay Dying* rapidly
 - 1930 *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Cape &
Smith): good notices
 - 1931 *Sanctuary* (scandalous hit)
-



Falkner to Faulkner

1931	Maurice Coindreau, "William Faulkner," <i>Nouvelle Revue Française</i> (June)
1933	<i>Tandis que j'agonise</i> , trans. Coindreau (Paris: Gallimard)
1934–35	<i>Autour d'une mère</i> , French theatrical version
1932–51	Hollywood screenwriting, e.g. <i>The Big Sleep</i> , dir. Howard Hawks (1946)
1936	<i>Absalom, Absalom!</i> (New York: Random House)
1938–39	<i>Le bruit et la fureur</i> (Paris: Gallimard); acclaimed by Sartre
1946	<i>The Portable Faulkner</i> , ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking) "An Error in Chemistry," <i>Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine</i> (June): 2nd prize in story contest
1948	Film deal for <i>Intruder in the Dust</i> (\$50,000)
1950	Nobel prize
1962	d.

Faulkner, the world

Faulkner thus helped a primitive and rural world that until then had seemed to demand a codified and descriptive realism to achieve novelistic modernity: in his hands, a violent, tribal civilization, impressed with the mark of biblical mythologies, opposed in every respect to urban modernity...became the privileged object of one of the most daring exercises in style of the century.

Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 337.

next

- ▶ finish the novel (100 pp., but it goes by fast)
- ▶ Lester, “As They Lay Dying” (excerpt on Canvas)