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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Between Demythologization and Transcendence: Faulkner's Poetics of Historical Trauma

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical analysis of William Faulkner's status as an unconventional novelist, examining how short prose decisively contributes to the construction of his mythopoetic universe. Building on Malcolm Cowley's observation that Faulkner does not write traditional novels but fragments of a discontinuous macrotext, this study argues that narrative fragmentation—expressed through the rejection of linearity, the plurality of voices, and temporal distortion—constitutes the authentic mode of his literary modernism, as evidenced in "The Bear" and "That Evening Sun".

The analysis focuses on the ways in which these short stories, though formally autonomous, are later organically integrated into major novels, revealing a circular compositional strategy and Faulkner's sustained engagement with memory and historical consciousness. Yoknapatawpha County is approached as a symbolic, mythical space where memory, trauma, and history intersect within a nonlinear, stratified temporality, linking personal experience to collective inheritance.

In contrast to Hemingway's stylistic economy, Faulkner's discourse is marked by density, ambiguity, and cumulative meaning, embodying two opposing paradigms of representing reality. In Faulkner's vision, myth no longer guarantees ontological stability but becomes fluid and contested, shaped by modernity's identity crisis, as his narratives negotiate historical trauma and its ethical implications. From this perspective, the paper reassesses Faulkner's influence on narrative postmodernism and reconsiders short prose as the generative nucleus of a tense, original literary mythology.

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## Introduction

According to Malcolm Cowley, one of the most knowledgeable exegetes of William Faulkner's work, Faulkner cannot be classified, in the traditional sense, as a canonical "novelist", since the narrative structure of his writings resists linearity and strict thematic cohesion: "He is not essentially a novelist [...] part of his novels combine two or more themes that have little organic connection [...] and the rest tend to divide into a series of episodes, like beads on a string".<sup>1</sup> This episodic structure—evident in works such as *The Sound and The Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*—is not a flaw, but "a formal strategy that foregrounds the multiplicity of perspectives within Faulkner's oeuvre".<sup>2</sup> Rather than indicating artistic incoherence, this fragmentation reflects a modernist poetics in which discontinuity and polyphony become deliberate aesthetic instruments. Cowley further notes that Faulkner's strength emerges either in his longer narratives or in the cumulative design of the fictional Yoknapatawpha County: "Faulkner is at his best and most himself either in the longer stories [...] or in the Yoknapatawpha saga as a whole".<sup>3</sup> As Faulkner himself affirms, "If a story is in you, it has to come out"<sup>4</sup>—underscoring his control over these expansive, episodic forms. Consequently, the coherence of Faulkner's work resides not in individual novels, but in the epic constellation they form collectively—a polyphonic, self-referential macrotext that aligns with Robert Hamblin's emphasis on "Faulkner's engagement with historical consciousness and narrative multiplicity".<sup>5</sup>

Although Cowley's trenchant position may seem excessively restrictive, it nonetheless highlights a central feature of Faulkner's work: the sustained development of a hybrid narrative form situated between the short story and the novel, both structurally and epistemologically. Faulkner forges this narrative poetics not only in his major novels, but also in short stories and novellas that, though often marginalized, articulate with particular intensity the themes and techniques of his oeuvre. Volumes such as *The Unvanquished* (1938), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and *The Wild Palms* (1939) resist fixed genre classification, functioning instead as sequences of interconnected or juxtaposed prose pieces unified by thematic coherence rather than by conventional novelistic continuity. A close reading of "The Bear" from *Go Down, Moses* exemplifies this method, as "the episodic structure mirrors generational trauma and the fragmented consciousness of the South",<sup>6</sup> situating individual experience within a broader historical rupture. In this context, Bleikasten's observation is particularly illuminating: "Faulkner's short fiction does not merely supplement his novels; it constitutes an integral dimension of his narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Cowley (1945, p. 348).

<sup>2</sup> Cowley (1945, p. 350)

<sup>3</sup> Cowley (1945, p. 356)

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Honeini (2019, p. 8).

<sup>5</sup> Hamblin (2022, p. 260).

<sup>6</sup> Matthews (2009, p. 103).



experimentation”.<sup>7</sup> This insight, however, should not obscure Faulkner’s deliberate modulation of themes across forms, which underscores both the aesthetic legitimacy of short fiction and its role in constructing the fractured narrative geography of modernism. To claim that Faulkner is not “essentially” a novelist is, therefore, to overlook the productive tension between story and novel that structures his work. Kean Campbell et al. reinforce this view, arguing that “Faulkner’s hybridization of forms anticipates contemporary narrative theories of trauma and historical layering”.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Pamela Knights and John Matthews similarly note that “Faulkner undermines the generic expectations of the novel by allowing the short story’s ellipsis and obliquity to infiltrate and reshape long-form fiction”.<sup>9</sup> As a result, generic boundaries become permeable, and rigid distinctions lose relevance within a syncretic literary practice. Rather than exhaustively mapping these intersections—since, as Faulkner’s modernism suggests, “genre is a question, not an answer”<sup>10</sup>—this study calls for a critical reappraisal of these zones of interference, demonstrating how Faulkner’s narrative structures encode historical trauma, ethical ambivalence, and aesthetic experimentation while deliberately subverting the conventions of the modernist novel.

## 1. Yoknapatawpha as a Modern Mythopoetic Space

One of the defining features of Faulkner’s short fiction is its integration into a rigorously articulated narrative mythology that contributes to the symbolic totality of Yoknapatawpha County. Rather than functioning as discrete units, these texts operate as fragments of a cumulative historical imagination rooted in the social, racial, and cultural realities of the American South, yet transformed into a mythopoetic space where linear time collapses into recursive duration. In this world, geography becomes an ontological matrix shaped by inheritance, repetition, and unresolved violence. Faulkner thus offers a mythic rewriting of the South, encapsulated in the assertion that “The past is never dead. It’s not even past”<sup>11</sup>—which signals the persistence of history and the dissolution of temporal boundaries. This conception is further dramatized in *Absalom, Absalom!* where Quentin reflects that “maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished”,<sup>12</sup> reinforcing Faulkner’s view of history as an ongoing psychic event. As Cleanth Brooks observes, “Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha is not merely a region; it is a cosmos”,<sup>13</sup> emphasizing its autonomy and internal coherence. John Matthews similarly argues that Yoknapatawpha functions as a “memory system”<sup>14</sup> rather than a mimetic space, registering the afterlives of Southern history. Despite their brevity,

<sup>7</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 372).

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, Kean, Dix & Templeton (2025, p. 294).

<sup>9</sup> Matthews (2009, p. 115).

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz (1990, p. 200).

<sup>11</sup> Faulkner (1975, p. 67).

<sup>12</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 22).

<sup>13</sup> Brooks (1985, p. 133).

<sup>14</sup> Matthews (2009, p.104).



Faulkner's short stories sustain the same archetypes and tensions found in the novels, maintaining a thematic density that situates them within a totalizing vision. As André Bleikasten suggests—though his claim requires qualification—“Faulkner's fiction constitutes a convergence of voices and histories that echo and contest one another”,<sup>15</sup> highlighting the intertextual and polyphonic nature of the Faulknerian project.

A comparison between William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway—both figures of American literary modernism—highlights the depth of Faulkner's narrative in contrast to the austerity characteristic of Hemingway's prose, clarifying the stakes of narrative density beyond stylistic opposition. Hemingway conceives his fictional universe as an autonomous entity with clearly delimited boundaries, a precisely outlined “slice of life”, exemplified by what he termed the “iceberg theory”, whereby expression represents only a fraction of experience: “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader [...] will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them”.<sup>16</sup> Faulkner, by contrast, resists omission in favor of accretion, situating his narratives within a fluid temporality where past and present interpenetrate and meaning accumulates. This logic is evident in *The Sound and the Fury*, where Benjy's fractured consciousness renders trauma not as a hidden depth but as an ever-present condition: “How the hell can I do anything right, with that dam family [...]”.<sup>17</sup> Faulkner's treatment anticipates what Jenna Sciuto identifies as “the belated and repetitive nature of traumatic experience”<sup>18</sup> and reflects what Bleikasten termed “the sedimentation of meaning”<sup>19</sup>—understood here as the gradual inscription of historical violence into narrative form. Thus, while Hemingway cultivates an essentialized simplicity grounded in restraint, Faulkner probes what is unsaid or repressed—what history refuses to stabilize—what Olga Vickery calls “a fiction of the unrepresentable”.<sup>20</sup> Faulknerian revelation, unlike Hemingway's sudden flashes of meaning, emerges through a hermeneutical process in which coherence unfolds gradually within an internally consistent yet temporally fractured world.

Far from establishing hierarchies or incompatibilities between aesthetic forms, a rigorous reading of William Faulkner's work requires moving beyond biographical context to recognize the unified narrative structure that underlies nearly his entire oeuvre, including the short stories. Although formally brief, many of these texts function as autonomous fragments of a larger epic vision, anticipating or completing the architecture of the major novels. It is therefore significant that most of Faulkner's short stories were written during the period of his greatest novels, and that some—such as “The Bear” or “Spotted Horses”—were later

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<sup>15</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 47).

<sup>16</sup> Hemingway (1999, pp. 157-158).

<sup>17</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 96).

<sup>18</sup> Sciuto (2025, p. 128).

<sup>19</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 52).

<sup>20</sup> Vickery (1995, p. 144).



incorporated into *Go Down, Moses* and *The Hamlet* respectively, while retaining a narrative density that exceeds their brevity. Faulkner himself gestures toward this continuity when he writes, “To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi”,<sup>21</sup> emphasizing the shared imaginative territory of both forms. As Bleikasten observes, “Faulkner’s short stories often serve as narrative testing grounds for broader thematic concerns that are later elaborated in his novels”,<sup>22</sup> yet this should not be read teleologically but rather as evidence of structural simultaneity. The short stories thus operate as semantic junctions within a dispersed epic, challenging rigid genre boundaries. Malcolm Cowley’s claim that Faulkner’s work constitutes an interconnected Yoknapatawpha mythology remains valid, though it must be qualified: short prose is not marginal to this project but essential to it. Irving Howe’s assertion that “if Hemingway had not written his short stories, the history of the genre would be different, whereas if Faulkner had not, it would be little changed”<sup>23</sup> overlooks this internal coherence. Close readings reveal not the marginality of Faulkner’s short fiction but its reconceptualization of the genre itself. As Olga Vickery notes, “Faulkner’s short stories are not mere accidents of publication but are integral to his imaginative enterprise”,<sup>24</sup> a view reinforced by Lawrence Schwartz, who situates them “at the core of Faulkner’s historical poetics rather than at its periphery”.<sup>25</sup> Despite their brevity, these stories contain a surplus of narrative and symbolic meaning, consistently suggesting a larger, coherent world beyond the limits of the individual text.

The evolution of contemporary prose, particularly the short narrative form, has been shaped by diverse aesthetic, cultural, and historical forces. Within this framework, Ernest Hemingway’s influence is felt primarily at the level of narrative technique—concise style, economy of detail, and iceberg principle—rather than in the broader scope of artistic expression. His narrative minimalism, though revolutionary, proved insufficient to fully represent the fragmented and anxiety-ridden reality of the post-war twentieth century, a limitation implicit in his belief that “the dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water”.<sup>26</sup> Later generations of writers increasingly turned to William Faulkner, whose dense, elliptical, and circular narratives more effectively articulated historical trauma and psychological instability. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin Compson’s reflection that “time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels”<sup>27</sup> encapsulates Faulkner’s temporal dislocation and existential unrest. Harold Bloom observes that “Faulkner’s obsessive return to the same traumatic moments constructs a

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<sup>21</sup> Brooks (1985, p. 201).

<sup>22</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 112).

<sup>23</sup> Howe (1991, p. 87).

<sup>24</sup> Vickery (1995, p. 134).

<sup>25</sup> Schwartz (1990, p. 128).

<sup>26</sup> Hemingway (1999, p. 71).

<sup>27</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 226).



mythos of the South that transcends local history and enters the realm of the archetypal”,<sup>28</sup> a view extended by John Matthews, who interprets this recurrence as “a formal enactment of historical consciousness”<sup>29</sup> rather than “a mere regional fixation”.<sup>30</sup> Unlike Hemingway’s restrained figures of silent endurance, Faulkner’s characters are engaged in a continual identity reconstruction and metaphysical self-interrogation—“I dont hate it”,<sup>31</sup> Quentin insists, even as his narrative exposes the impossibility of detachment—bringing them closer to the central dilemmas of modernity. This shift was not limited to American literature—where writers such as William Styron, Eudora Welty, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and James Baldwin fused Hemingwayan restraint with Faulknerian depth—but extended European prose. From Camus’s *La Chute*, where “man’s radical freedom is a burden rather than a gift”,<sup>32</sup> to Günter Grass’s *Hundejahre*, with its grotesque, polyphonic vision of history, Faulkner’s legacy emerges as a compelling paradigm for representing existential anxiety, traumatic memory, and the fragility of identity in postmodern prose.

The evolution of the modern short story subtly mirrors the trajectory of the novel, marking a shift from the examination of particular cases to the exploration of recurring, often paradigmatic situations and existential limits that condense the most generalizable aspects of the human condition. These limit-situations function as symbolic nodes in which accident becomes emblem, as Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” transforms an isolated crime into a communal allegory of historical paralysis, articulated through the claim that “All the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches [...]”.<sup>33</sup> Within this framework, William Faulkner’s influence on the modern short story not only rivals but surpasses that of Hemingway, serving as a crucial reference for understanding the narrative and psychological complexity short prose can attain. Whereas Hemingway’s restrained style “reduces experience to its skeletal essentials”,<sup>34</sup> Faulkner embraces narrative density and discursive polyphony that “transform chaos into a form of moral and narrative structure”,<sup>35</sup> a process vividly enacted in “Dry September”, where the communal voice fractures into rumor and violence: “It had gone like a fire in dry grass: the rumor, the story, whatever it was”.<sup>36</sup> Faulkner’s stories thus emerge not as spaces of ambiguity in which time, identity, and guilt intersect, a condition encapsulated in the recurring image that “the dark world seemed to lie stricken beneath the cold moon and the

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<sup>28</sup> Bloom (2008, p. 214).

<sup>29</sup> Matthews (2009, p. 66).

<sup>30</sup> Matthews (2009, p. 66).

<sup>31</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 56).

<sup>32</sup> Camus (1956, p. 89).

<sup>33</sup> Faulkner (2009, p. 80).

<sup>34</sup> Howe (1991, p. 262).

<sup>35</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 154).

<sup>36</sup> Faulkner (2009, p. 453).



lidless stars”.<sup>37</sup> This ambiguity explains the polarization of critical responses—ranging from admiration for his technical virtuosity to concerns about opacity—yet such tensions ultimately reinforce his artistic significance, since “the contradictions in Faulkner’s stories are not flaws but signs of a deeper literary integrity”.<sup>38</sup>

Access to the dense and labyrinthine fictional universe of Yoknapatawpha County is not achieved through smooth narrative paths or familiar literary conventions; rather, it requires a hermeneutic initiation into a world marked by non-linear temporality, narrative polyphony, and Southern mythology. The proliferation of glossaries, interpretive “keys” and studies of Faulknerian characters—reflects both the difficulty of reception and the abundance of meanings that demand deciphering. This abundance is constituted by competing and often contradictory perspectives that, like memory or dream, obey a logic of affect and distorted temporal perception rather than strict causality. As Michael Millgate states, “Faulkner’s sense of time is not chronological but psychological and mythical”.<sup>39</sup> This formulation is illuminated by Faulkner’s assertion in *Absalom, Absalom!*—a novel structured through obsessive retellings of Southern history—that “nothing matters but breath, breathing, to know and to be alive”.<sup>40</sup> Within this universe, the “why” of events cannot be separated from their “how”, as causality dissolves into a cyclical and claustrophobic temporal order shaped by trauma and memory. Narrative reconstruction thus becomes limited, and the pursuit of “truth” turns into a confrontation with subjective temporality and collective guilt. For this reason, the reader’s initiation into this world of damnation violently denied by the obsession with atonement is best approached through selected short stories, which offer a more condensed image of Faulkner’s fundamental concerns. As Bleikasten observes, “Faulkner does not write stories about time; he writes time itself into the structure of the story”,<sup>41</sup> a principle that frames narrative form as an existential vision marked by guilt, memory, and the desire for salvation. Such preparatory reading enables a more lucid reception of the novels, in which meaning emerges only in relation to the totality of the Faulknerian universe, perpetually torn between the weight of the past and the impossibility of forgetting.

In the structure of traditional myth, whether archaic or popular, an idealized *topos* is outlined, situated in a suspended *chronotope*—atemporal and asocial—that transcends the historical condition of man and projects him into a symbolic order, as seen in classical epics and folk narratives. The fabulous dimension attenuates temporal and social relations, tending to dissolve them into a metaphysics of meaning, where “reality is not copied but

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<sup>37</sup> Faulkner (2009, p. 465).

<sup>38</sup> Singal (1987, p. 10).

<sup>39</sup> Millgate (1978, p. 298).

<sup>40</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 33).

<sup>41</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 62).



transformed”,<sup>42</sup> since myth operates through symbolic condensation rather than empirical mimesis. The empirical perspective of the real is subordinated to a ceremonial transcendence, either through exalted apotheosis or through the mythologizing of destiny. At the center of these structures persists a fundamental tension between man and supernatural forces, concerned with overcoming the physical order through symbolic language.

Modernity—despite the era of the disenchantment of the world described by Max Weber—did not abolish myth but re-signified it within a new historical consciousness. Unlike traditional myth, which “abolishes history by restoring an eternal order”,<sup>43</sup> modern myth instead problematizes time, now understood not as cyclical but as finite and shaped by human action. Time no longer subjugates humanity; it becomes something individuals attempt to confront and comprehend—a perspective anticipated by Faulkner’s vision of subjective temporality, where “time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people”.<sup>44</sup> In Faulkner’s novels, time is fractured and personal, reinforcing myth as a means of questioning reality rather than escaping it. This transformation reflects a broader shift in mentality—from passive submission to eternity toward an active engagement with historical becoming—so that “modern myths do not aim at transcendence, but at confrontation with temporality itself.”<sup>45</sup>

Great authors of French realism, such as Balzac and Stendhal, articulated a modern anxiety tied to temporal finitude, anticipating the rupture between the individual's inner time and the objective social time imposed by history. In Balzac, this awareness of irreversibility produces not resignation but extraordinary narrative energy, embodied in a totalizing project that reconstructs the past through obsessive detail. As Karl Zender affirms “Realism is not a window on the world, but a structure of mediation”,<sup>46</sup> underscoring that Balzacian representation filters reality ideologically and symbolically rather than reflecting it. Stendhal more subtly examines the formation of identity under the pressure of social time, particularly in his depiction of psychological becoming constrained by historical forces, an approach resonant with Robert Hamblin’s claim that “The temporality of the self is always already split between the promise of future coherence and the fragmentation of present perception”,<sup>47</sup> revealing the tension between inner unity and lived discontinuity. In this disjunction between social order and affective flux, Stendhal inaugurates a modern literary paradigm in which the individual retreats into a fragmented inner time marked by lucidity and disillusionment. Western literature expresses a crisis in the representation of time, where harmony between

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<sup>42</sup> Aiken (2009, p. 269).

<sup>43</sup> Barthes (1977, p. 109).

<sup>44</sup> Faulkner (1956, p. 28).

<sup>45</sup> Honeini (2019, p. 8).

<sup>46</sup> Zender (2002, p. 175).

<sup>47</sup> Hamblin (2022, p. 146).



self and world is no longer attainable. Yet, as Joseph Blotner observes, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”,<sup>48</sup> and personal memory emerges as a final, though limited, form of resistance to historical alienation. The narrative mythologies of Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and William Faulkner transcend fiction to become existential investigations of modern Western subjectivity. In *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Proust constructs what Roland Barthes terms “a semiology of the self”,<sup>49</sup> where involuntary memory disrupts chronological time and reveals a fragile subjective “truth”, even as it confirms the melancholy insight that “The past is not a package one can lay away”.<sup>50</sup> Kafka, by contrast, imagines time as metaphysical oppression: in *Das Schloss*, characters are trapped in a continuous present without resolution, emblematic of an absurd justice and a condition of “temporal entrapment without eschatology”.<sup>51</sup> Faulkner, through the fractured chronology of the Yoknapatawpha saga, offers a mythology of the American South in which history is “neither dead nor past”,<sup>52</sup> and the individual remains shaped by an inescapable past.

## 2. Faulkner and the ontology of Memory

In a deeply self-reflexive and aesthetically constructed manner, William Faulkner approaches his creative act not as a mythographic reconstruction of his native South, but as a confrontation with the instability of memory and the fragility of history as filtered through present consciousness. This instability registers formally in his narrators, as when Quentin Compson in *The Sound and The Fury* confesses that “I couldn’t stop thinking about the past”.<sup>53</sup> Rather than establishing an immutable myth, Faulkner “sublimates the actual to the apocryphal”,<sup>54</sup> a process that doesn’t monumentalize history but exposes its fractures, granting the freedom of fiction while imposing the responsibility of an ontological vision of the human condition. The mythical space of Yoknapatawpha County is thus no nostalgic replica of an idyllic South; but a narrative “Cosmos” suspended between history and legend, memory and present: “I created a Cosmos of my own [...] if it were taken away the universe itself would collapse”.<sup>55</sup> Yet this cosmological ambition is undermined by temporal disjunctions and narrative gaps, evident across works such as *Absalom, Absalom!* where history remains irrecoverable. Faulkner’s modern myth is therefore marked by temporality and historical trauma—particularly the afterlives of slavery and defeat—so that fiction becomes a negotiation between time and meaning. As Richard Godden observes,

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<sup>48</sup> Blotner (2005, p. 67).

<sup>49</sup> Barthes (1977, p. 41).

<sup>50</sup> Dickinson (1986, p. 261).

<sup>51</sup> Corngold (2023, p. 191).

<sup>52</sup> Faulkner (1956, p. 38).

<sup>53</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 72).

<sup>54</sup> Blotner (2005, p. 84).

<sup>55</sup> Abdur-Rahman (2019, p. 126).



“Faulkner’s fiction repeatedly stages the inability of myth to provide ontological security in the face of economic and historical rupture”,<sup>56</sup> a view extended by Lawrence Schwartz’s emphasis on memory as “a contested and socially produced phenomenon”.<sup>57</sup> What might have become a regional allegory is transformed into an unsettling dialectic of becoming, where the real, the symbolic, and the temporal reflect one another.

Faulkner’s reflections on the sources of his work reveal an artistic vision grounded in an intimate and empathetic knowledge of Southern reality, whose human and historical materials he transforms with lucidity and passion. Writing about his “own little postage stamp of native soil”,<sup>58</sup> he doesn’t seek to confine it, but to test its moral and historical density. Drawing on the affective geography of Oxford, Ripley, and Holly Springs—reimagined as the fictional town of Jefferson—Faulkner reconstructs, through Yoknapatawpha County, a recognizable Southern world in which biographical detail, family genealogy, and social hierarchies are rendered with quasi-ethnographic precision. This mimetic veracity sustains a poetics in which “the past is never dead”, encapsulating how the South’s legacy of slavery, civil war, and segregation saturates both narrative present and character consciousness. Accordingly, “the South is not so much a geographical place as it is a repository of collective memory”,<sup>59</sup> a view Charles Aiken extends by framing Yoknapatawpha as “a site of transgenerational haunting”.<sup>60</sup> Through this fictional geography, Faulkner’s realism exceeds faithful representation to probe human destiny in relation to history and communal identity. As a result, “his realism is haunted by myth, memory, and moral inquiry”,<sup>61</sup> producing what Ahmed Honeini terms a “persistent ethical unease”<sup>62</sup> rather than narrative closure. Reality in Faulkner’s fiction is refracted through memory and temporality, becoming a psychological experience. As Blotner observes, Faulkner offers “not a linear sequence of events but a consciousness grappling with time’s irreversibility and the fragmentation of experience”,<sup>63</sup> establishing time as an ontological force—a “shaping presence”<sup>64</sup>—that molds both character identity and moral perception.

It is imperative, in analyzing Faulkner’s work, to move beyond a biographical approach and to recognize, from a hermeneutic and mythopoetic perspective, how the realistic substratum of the American South is transformed into a mythological complex. History functions as an active force shaping individual and collective consciousness, erupting belatedly in traumatic form through characters who compulsively repeat or resist

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<sup>56</sup> Godden (1997, p. 45).

<sup>57</sup> Schwartz (1990, p. 38).

<sup>58</sup> Faulkner (1956, p. 55).

<sup>59</sup> Millgate (1978, p. 33).

<sup>60</sup> Aiken (2009, p. 148).

<sup>61</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p.145).

<sup>62</sup> Honeini (2019, p. 10).

<sup>63</sup> Blotner (2005, p. 316).

<sup>64</sup> Vickery (1995, p. 82).



memory, as seen across Yoknapatawpha narratives such as *The Sound and The Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* This vision articulates a tragic yet affirmative conception of the human condition, in which historical memory becomes a symbolic, regenerative—rather than destructive—matrix. Though influenced by Balzacian realism, Faulkner did not map Southern society; he probed the psychological and moral labyrinth of a humanity in crisis yet still capable of hope. As Harold Bloom observed, “Faulkner’s greatness lies in his ability to dramatize the human soul in conflict with itself, where memory, guilt, and endurance shape identity”,<sup>65</sup> an endurance that emerges not abstractly but through concrete suffering and ethical struggle. At the heart of Faulkner’s work lies not only the glorification of survival, but an ethic of resistance and memory, within a universe where time is circular, and identity remains traumatic yet profoundly human. His rejection of irremediable human decline— “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail”<sup>66</sup>—is not naïve humanism, but a fragile ethical wager made in full awareness of historical catastrophe, affirming that suffering, empathy, and courage are preserved through direct confrontation with it.

In William Faulkner’s fiction, the return to the past is a strategy to indict the present, which he portrays as a space of moral disintegration and fractured human relations. In *The Sound and The Fury*, Quentin Compson recalls that his grandfather gave him “the mausoleum of all hope and desire [...]; not that [he] may remember time, but that [he] might forget it now [...]”,<sup>67</sup> revealing a present that is ethically hollow rather than cut off from history. Faulkner condemns a modernity defined by alienation and the collapse of moral reference points, where, as Bleikasten argues, “man’s capacity for evil is no longer veiled by the myths of progress”,<sup>68</sup> a condition dramatized within the fiction itself. In *Requiem for a Nun*, the claim that “so good can come out of evil”,<sup>69</sup> appears stripped of transcendence, exposing violence as self-justifying. The Southern past is therefore revisited not to be idealized but to be interrogated, especially in relation to its foundational crime—slavery. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Rosa Coldfield’s assertion that the past “never passes”<sup>70</sup> emphasizes its unresolved ethical burden rather than any consoling authority. As Robert Warren notes, Faulkner “cannot find in the past a clear moral authority, for the very structures he revisits are tainted by original sin”,<sup>71</sup> while Thadious Davis similarly argue that Faulkner’s historical imagination “refuses reconciliation in favor of ethical disturbance”.<sup>72</sup> The past, though morally compromised, once offered a symbolic framework for meaning and justice. By contrast, the present—embodied by figures such as Popeye or Jason Compson—appears

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<sup>65</sup> Bloom (2008, p. 11).

<sup>66</sup> Faulkner (1950, p. 2).

<sup>67</sup> Faulkner (1995, pp. 275-276).

<sup>68</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 47).

<sup>69</sup> Faulkner (1975, p. 182).

<sup>70</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 21).

<sup>71</sup> Warren (1967, p. 116).

<sup>72</sup> Davis (2003, p. 72).



ethically vacant, where moral language collapses into instrumentality and, as Bleikasten observes, “truth is no longer a collective pursuit, but a casualty of modern subjectivity”.<sup>73</sup> Faulkner does not redeem history; he interrogates it to expose its failures while confronting a present in which evil operates without restraint or moral limit.

Far from offering a systematic discourse on the relationship between past and present, William Faulkner’s work articulates a poetics of fragmentation and a rhetoric of discontinuity, enacted through disrupted chronologies, fractured perspectives, and recursive narration. History—real or imagined—thus becomes the raw material for an inner epic marked by ontological conflict. In *Go Down, Moses*, history functions as an accumulated psychic burden, what Isaac McCaslin call “the ledger”,<sup>74</sup> an unresolved inheritance of guilt rooted in slavery and familial violence. Faulkner’s strength lies in the tension between myth and demythification, between the lure of absolutes and the recognition of tragedy, echoing Robert Warren’s claim that “His work shows us the tragic sense of life as it reasserts itself against sentimentality”,<sup>75</sup> and Kean Campbell’s et. al view of narrative rupture as “a symptom of historical violence”.<sup>76</sup> This ambivalence—using Southern myth to construct identity while resisting it as a form of liberation—produces a metaphysical unease between the real and the imaginary. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Faulkner affirmed that “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself [...] alone can make good writing”,<sup>77</sup> a declaration embodied by Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, whose fractured racial and existential identity literalizes that struggle: “He was working fast, yet thinking went slow enough”.<sup>78</sup> Across his oeuvre, Faulkner portrays the human subject as both victim and agent, striving to affirm humanity within a destabilized universe where confrontation with evil is inevitable and foundational.

The characters appear irremediably trapped in an existential mechanism dominated by curse, damnation, and a perpetual search for self, within a narrative universe where destiny assumes mythical dimensions and consciousness is marked by an ontological crisis. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Thomas Sutpen’s ‘design’ exemplifies this tragic determinism: his attempt to impose meaning on history collapses under the weight of racial violence and inherited guilt, revealing the futility of mastery and fate. This fatal entanglement of hatred, knowledge, and endurance is articulated in the novel’s meditation on time and obsession:

Maybe you have to know anybody awful well to love them but when you have hated somebody for forty-three years you will know them awful well so maybe it’s better

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<sup>73</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 123).

<sup>74</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 27).

<sup>75</sup> Warren (1967, p. 37).

<sup>76</sup> Campbell, Kean, Dix, & Templeton (2025, p. 268).

<sup>77</sup> Faulkner, (1950, p. 3).

<sup>78</sup> Faulkner (2000, p. 44).



then maybe it's fine then because after forty-three years they cant any longer surprise you or make you either very contented or very mad.<sup>79</sup>

André Malraux captures the tragic essence of this universe when he describes it as “a world where man exists only crushed”,<sup>80</sup> highlighting an anthropology of dissolution and constitutive failure that defines the Faulknerian human being. Similarly, Sartre observes that “Faulkner’s man is [...] lost from birth and furiously determined to be lost”,<sup>81</sup> emphasizing not only predestination but also “the paradoxically voluntary dimension of self-destruction”<sup>82</sup>—a tragic impulse that transforms failure into a vocation. Yet this damnation is never passive: it becomes the catalyst for an inner struggle, an attempt to define identity in relation to oneself, to others, and to personal or collective history. Faulkner himself acknowledges this tragic knot of existence when he declares, “For me, that’s the most tragic condition a man can find himself in—not to know who he is”,<sup>83</sup> a condition narratively embodied in *As I Lay Dying* through Darl Bundren’s fragmentation of consciousness, where identity dissolves under the pressure of loss and trauma:

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not.<sup>84</sup>

Within this paradigm, gesture emerges as the ultimate form of ontological resistance. As Irving Howe notes, “for Faulkner’s characters, the gesture becomes the outward form of their integrity”,<sup>85</sup> a claim evident in acts like Dilsey’s endurance in *The Sound and The Fury*, which embodies an ethics of persistence rather than redemption: “Dilsey sat bolt upright beside, crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb”.<sup>86</sup> This illustrates that action—even imperfect—is a way of affirming being, confronting life’s weight, and leaving nothing un-lived. This “freedom”,<sup>87</sup> as Howe calls it, is paradoxical: a lucid acceptance of necessity—a tragic freedom that transforms suffering into insight, confronting human limits without leading to irredeemable despair, achieving instead a form of knowledge and existential dignity.

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<sup>79</sup> Faulkner (1986, pp. 265-266).

<sup>80</sup> Malraux (1965, p. 212).

<sup>81</sup> Sartre (2007, p. 101).

<sup>82</sup> Abdur-Rahman (2019, p.127).

<sup>83</sup> Faulkner (1956, p. 56).

<sup>84</sup> Faulkner (1935, p. 59).

<sup>85</sup> Howe (1991, p. 302).

<sup>86</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 285).

<sup>87</sup> Howe (1991, p. 302).



The temporal unfolding in Faulknerian prose, from the Civil War to the modern era, transcends linear chronology, constructing a fragmented and affective temporality in which past and present exist in constant dialogue. In narratives such as “The Bear” and “An Odor of Verbena”, Faulkner develops a double temporal logic: a painful recollection of the past mediated by narrators situated in the present, alongside fluid movements between eras that dissolve temporal boundaries, reflecting a memory that “refuses to remain still”.<sup>88</sup> This logic underpins Faulkner’s assertion that “there is no such thing as was — only is”,<sup>89</sup> emphasizing the impossibility of separating the present from inherited trauma and myth. Individual and collective memories overlap, producing what is described as “a belated temporality structured by repetition rather than recall”<sup>90</sup> and “obsessed with the persistence of memory and the inescapability of the past”.<sup>91</sup> Characters oscillate between tragic lucidity and guilty resignation: in “The Bear”, Ike McCaslin confronts historical culpability when he recognizes the land as “cursed before it was ever owned”<sup>92</sup>—while stories such as “The Evening Sun” and “Fox Haunt” depict the past as an inescapable force shaping identity and moral reckoning.

Considered by literary critics one of Faulkner’s most complex commentaries on the Civil War, *The Unvanquished* moves beyond military confrontation to transform the conflict between the Indian-American aristocrat Saucier Weddel and his family of impoverished white mountain men into a meditation on racial identity, historical trauma, and collective guilt in the postbellum South. Although grounded in a historical context, the novel dismantles the expected North-South opposition, offering instead an analysis of social resentment embodied in Vatch, whose hostility toward Weddel exceeds class antagonism and targets Weddel’s racial ambiguity, emerging less from ideology than from what the narrative presents as an inherited affect. As Daniel Singal observes, “Faulkner’s South is never merely a setting, but a psychic landscape marked by unresolved tensions and inherited guilt”,<sup>93</sup> and in *The Unvanquished*, this psychic landscape is shaped by historical silence and the impossibility of forgiveness, rendered through ellipses, withheld motives, and delayed recognition. Faulkner does not resolve these tensions but “confronts the reader with the specter of history, not to repair it but to recognize it in all its moral ambiguity”,<sup>94</sup> suggesting that the war, rather than purifying, “has only succeeded in transforming the guilt of slavery into a legacy of perpetual suffering”.<sup>95</sup> Through restrained narration, tension arises

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<sup>88</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 89).

<sup>89</sup> Faulkner (1956, p. 36).

<sup>90</sup> McKenna (2022, p. 42).

<sup>91</sup> Singal (1987, p. 22).

<sup>92</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 153).

<sup>93</sup> Singal (1987, p. 25).

<sup>94</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 132).

<sup>95</sup> Gorra (2020, p. 326).



from symbolic encounters, where silence and gesture become repositories of historical violence, each echoing a collective tragedy.

In *Wash*, William Faulkner offers one of his sharpest reflections on the legacy of the Civil War, using Wash Jones to expose enduring class tensions in the postbellum South and the collapse of the antebellum order. Although Faulkner described Wash as “the man who survived the Civil War”—“In another sense, Wash Jones represented the man who survived the Civil War. [...] He had been Wash Jones before 1861, and after 1865 he was still Wash Jones, and Sutpen finally collided with him”<sup>96</sup>—the character ultimately exceeds mere survival. Wash becomes a symbolic residue of history itself, resistant to transformation, because “he was not articulated in this world. He was a walking shadow”.<sup>97</sup> His persistence masks a deep accumulation of social resentment that erupts violently in what Michael Gorra calls “an acting out”.<sup>98</sup> “The poor white,” notes Karl Zender, “is not simply a passive victim of Southern history, but a latent force, a deferred reckoning”,<sup>99</sup> and Wash embodies this “reckoning”—a brutal assertion of dignity long humiliated and ignored, emerging not from ideology but from sustained negation, “squatting against a post, chortling and guffawing”.<sup>100</sup> The conflict between Wash and Sutpen thus moves beyond a master-servant relationship to expose the illegitimate foundations of power itself: “Sutpen’s wealth was built not merely on slave labor, but on the systematic erasure of ethical memory”.<sup>101</sup> Wash’s murder of Sutpen is therefore a visceral judgement on a history built upon exploitation—a form of justice beyond institutional morality: “Wash Jones has fixed old Sutpen at last. It taken him twenty years to do it, but he has got a holt of old Sutpen at last where Sutpen will either have to tear meat or squeal”.<sup>102</sup>

In William Faulkner’s prose, the idea of “endurance” functions as a central ethical principle, shaping a tragic vision of human and historical destiny in the American South. It signifies not simple survival, but “people who had learned humility through suffering and learned pride through the endurance which survived the suffering”,<sup>103</sup> a moral confrontation with a past marked by collective trauma. In novels such as *Go Down, Moses* and *The Sound and The Fury*, “endurance” emerges as an act of moral will rather than passivity, resisting the fragmentation of identity in a South haunted by slavery and the loss of a sacred bond with the land. The land itself “outlasted man”,<sup>104</sup> silently bearing the traces of human violence. As Richard Godden argues, “Faulkner’s economy of endurance is always shadowed by the

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<sup>96</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 255).

<sup>97</sup> Faulkner (1986, p.16).

<sup>98</sup> Gorra (2020, p.100).

<sup>99</sup> Zender (2002, p.103).

<sup>100</sup> Faulkner (1986, p.106).

<sup>101</sup> Godden (1997, p. 288).

<sup>102</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 230).

<sup>103</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 303).

<sup>104</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 316).



economics of exploitation”,<sup>105</sup> a view extended by Charles Aiken, who defines endurance as “a traumatic survival strategy shaped by historical repetition”,<sup>106</sup> inseparable from “the history of oppression and the mechanisms of a dehumanizing modernity”.<sup>107</sup>

From an integrative hermeneutic perspective, “The Bear” can be understood not only as a narrative “culmination” of Faulkner’s work, as David Wright describes it, but also as an “ontological and epistemological node”,<sup>108</sup> where the central tensions of literary modernity converge without yielding to totalizing synthesis. As part of the Yoknapatawpha cycle, the story forms a dense spiral of overlapping meanings, enacted formally through Faulkner’s extended, recursive syntax, which resists closure. Reading becomes an initiatory process of continual reinvestigation, where myth, Southern history, nature, and collective guilt intersect. The story’s enduring interpretive richness is underscored by recent scholarship, including a 429-page study proposing “seven approaches” to reading “The Bear”, attesting to its generative complexity as a canonical text. As Bleikasten observes, “Faulkner’s woods are not merely a setting but a moral and metaphysical landscape”,<sup>109</sup> a liminal space that is both Edenic and damnable, where characters confront not only the legendary bear but their own ethical and existential limits. Aware of this symbolic density, Faulkner cautioned students at the University of Virginia against overinterpretation, urging attentiveness to the human core of the narrative: “Don’t bother just to be better than your contemporaries or predecessors. Try to be better than yourself”.<sup>110</sup> Thus, rather than exhausting meaning, a lucid critical approach should preserve the text’s organic mystery, allowing the reader “to step, trembling and awake, into the heart of the ancient forests of Yoknapatawpha”:

The hunt was simply a — a symbol of pursuit. Most of — of anyone's life is a pursuit of something. [...]. This was a — a symbolization of the pursuit which is a normal part of—of anyone's life while he stays alive, told in terms which were familiar to me and — and dramatic to me. The protagonist could have been anything else beside that bear. I simply told a story which was a — a natural, normal part of anyone's life in a familiar and, to me, interesting terms, without any deliberate intent to put symbolism in it. I was simply telling something which was, in this case, the child, the — the need, the compulsion of the child to adjust to the adult world. It's how he does it, how he survives it, whether he is destroyed by trying to adjust to the adult world or whether, despite his small size, he does adjust within his capacity. And always to learn something, to learn something of — not only to pursue but to — to overtake and then

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<sup>105</sup> Godden (1997, p. 387).

<sup>106</sup> Aiken (2009, p. 144).

<sup>107</sup> Aiken (2009, p. 148).

<sup>108</sup> Wright (2022, p. 281).

<sup>109</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 112).

<sup>110</sup> Faulkner (1956, p. 52).



to have the compassion not to destroy. To — to catch, to touch, and then let go because then tomorrow you can pursue again. If you destroy what you caught, then it's gone. It's finished. And that, to me, is — is sometimes the greater part of valor, but always it's the greater part of pleasure, not to destroy what you have pursued. The pursuit is the — is the thing, not the reward, not the — the gain [...].<sup>111</sup>

In a manner emblematic of American South literature, Isaac McCaslin's coming of age in "The Bear" dramatizes the conflict between primordial wilderness and the advance of civilization, crystallized in his realization that the forest must be entered "without a gun".<sup>112</sup> Human intrusion into his sacred space becomes a violation of an ancestral cosmological balance. Isaac's renunciation of his compass, watch, and stick—symbols of rational order, mechanical time, and violence—constitutes an act of spiritual purification, through which he seeks an uncorrupted relationship with nature: "It was the watch, the compass, the stick—the three lifeless mechanicals with which for nine hours he had fended the wilderness off".<sup>113</sup> Only after this ethical dispossession can he "see Old Ben",<sup>114</sup> the legendary bear whose presence signifies a form of knowledge inaccessible through domination. His refusal to kill Old Ben thus represents an alternative epistemology grounded in silent communion rather than technological control. Knowledge, in this paradigm, emerges as an understanding of human-environment interdependence, reflecting a tragic humanism in which moral awareness is inseparable from the recognition of inevitable historical decay. Faulkner situates the narrative within the American pastoral tradition while transforming it into a modern *bildungsroman*, where individual growth is bound to moral and cultural loss. As Jena Sciuto observes, the story is "another American *Bildungsroman* of a boy growing up in America and facing all the special obstacles our culture has placed in the way of moral maturity",<sup>115</sup> an initiation resolved not through triumph, but through the painful assumption of becoming a witness and heir to a vanishing world.

In "The Bear", William Faulkner constructs not only a breakdown of ancestral ties between humans and nature, but also an ethical model of regeneration—a call for active moral responsibility in response to modern ecological and social alienation. The fourth part of the story, added later to the 1942 *Saturday Evening Post* version, marks a decisive transformation in Isaac McCaslin. Moving beyond passive reflection, Isaac acts on a moral revelation drawn from his study of family history and the ownership of land. In a tense dialogue with his cousin Edmonds, he condemns the reduction of land to a commodity, which he identifies as the root of slavery and broader ethical collapse in the South:

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<sup>111</sup> Faulkner (1956, pp. 55-56).

<sup>112</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 232).

<sup>113</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 246).

<sup>114</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 327).

<sup>115</sup> Sciuto (2025, p. 155).



‘Don’t you see?’ he cried. Don’t you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse onto the land: maybe for that reason their descendants alone can—not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted. Then your peoples’ turn will come because we have forfeited ours. But not now. Not yet. Don’t you see?’<sup>116</sup>

Thus, Isaac McCaslin’s renunciation of his land inheritance in *Go Down, Moses* is an existential and sacrificial act grounded in a Christian understanding of guilt and atonement, shaped by the South’s history of slavery and violence. Critics often read this choice mystically, aligning it with a Christic pattern reinforced by Isaac’s adoption of the carpenter’s profession and his voluntary rejection of possession and power. However, Thadious Davis cautions against “a purely redemptive reading”,<sup>117</sup> emphasizing instead “the structural limits of Isaac’s gesture within racial history”.<sup>118</sup> Cleanth Brooks similarly argues that “Isaac’s abdication is not a failure of manhood, but rather an act of moral heroism, a recognition of a higher law”,<sup>119</sup> suggesting an attempt to recover a sacred moral code predating capitalist corruption. Robert Hamblin further notes that “Faulkner’s mythopoeic imagination uses Isaac not as a character, but as a conduit for a larger meditation on history, race, and redemption”,<sup>120</sup> situating Isaac’s renunciation as a symbolic response to collective Southern guilt.

### 3. Narrative Form as Ethical Praxis in Faulkner’s Fiction

In the traditionalist and religious context of the American South, William Faulkner formulates his moral and artistic vision not by adhering to conventional Christian values, but by testing them against a fragmented and spiritually eroded reality. Although Christianity operates as a cultural and moral backdrop in his fiction, it does not function as the central axis of ethical reconstruction; rather, it becomes a framework in crisis that Faulkner interrogates in order to articulate an active, secularized, yet profoundly responsible morality. As Irving Howe observes, “Faulkner struggles to define his moral vision against a background of disintegrating traditional beliefs, and what matters in his work is not the background, which is commonplace, but the struggle, which is unique”,<sup>121</sup> highlighting Faulkner’s refusal to be constrained by an inherited ethos and his pursuit of moral freedom amid historical

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<sup>116</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 288).

<sup>117</sup> Davis (2003, p. 74).

<sup>118</sup> Davis (2003, p. 78).

<sup>119</sup> Brooks (1989, p. 296).

<sup>120</sup> Hamblin (2022, p. 189).

<sup>121</sup> Howe (1991, p. 15).



collapse. John Matthews extends this insight by interpreting Faulkner's ethics as a form of "historical accountability"<sup>122</sup> rather than moral abstraction. In "The Bear", Ike McCaslin's renunciation of his inherited plantation is not a passive withdrawal from the South's corrupt legacy, but an attempt at ethical reconfiguration, complicated by his own recognition that moral action requires engagement: "I think man has to do more than just renounce. He should have been more positive, not avoid people".<sup>123</sup> His admission that "this land is, indubitably, of and by itself cursed"<sup>124</sup> underscores the inescapably embodied and historical nature of responsibility. Consequently, Part IV of "The Bear"—often criticized for its philosophical density and narrative rupture—plays a crucial role in the novel's structure, reflecting Faulkner's understanding of knowledge as fragmentary and experiential, lived before it is fully grasped. This nonlinear moral temporality, in which decisions are both cause and consequence, culminates in Ike's final choice, which not only marks a stage of spiritual maturation but also leaves the narrative ethically open, sustaining the possibility of active hope amid the collapse of traditional values.

"The Bear" is distinguished by an ideational density, largely avoiding rhetorical digressions into speculative meditations on human destiny or transcendence. Its narrative structure is grounded in a sensory acuity toward the material universe, where humans and animals coexist within a dynamic that reflects a world on the verge of extinction—a world in which life and death are simultaneously consumed within an inexorable organic cycle. Faulkner's description of Old Ben, the legendary bear haunted in the novella, as "not a mortal but an anachronism"<sup>125</sup> crystallizes the tension between mythic endurance and historical decay. The hunting scenes, charged with ritual solemnity, transcend realism to become expressions of an American mythology in decline: "He felt the old lift of the heart [...] he would never lose it, no matter how old in hunting and pursuit: the best, the best of all breathing, the humility and the pride".<sup>126</sup> Even in the stylistically dense Part IV, where Faulkner "attempts to swallow the entire world in a single sentence",<sup>127</sup> as Cleanth Brooks notes, the interior monologue creates a sustained tension between material experience and abstract meaning—a hallmark of Faulknerian modernism. As Faulkner states in his 1956 *Paris Interview*, fiction must "leave no room for anything but truth",<sup>128</sup> reframing the monologue as epistemological necessity. No longer introspective, as in Anderson or Conrad, it becomes "the only valid expression of reality"<sup>129</sup>—a subjective reality perceived through consciousness. The reconstruction of the real thus unfolds through memory and moral

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<sup>122</sup> Matthews (2009, p. 152).

<sup>123</sup> Blotner (2005, p. 19).

<sup>124</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 298).

<sup>125</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 167).

<sup>126</sup> Faulkner (1991, p. 233).

<sup>127</sup> Brooks (1985, p. 294).

<sup>128</sup> Faulkner (1956, p. 52).

<sup>129</sup> Blotner (2005, p. 212).



perception, forming a totalizing narrative space. Through these aesthetic choices, Faulkner pushes modern prose to its limits, engaging in an “extreme effort to make the form contain the full burden of meaning”,<sup>130</sup> producing both the text’s difficulty and its metaphysical depth.

In “An Odor of Verbena”, the closing story of *The Unvanquished*, William Faulkner brings the Reconstruction narrative to a moral conclusion by redefining heroism in a postwar Southern world shaped by violence and obsolete codes of honor. Bayard Sartoris emerges as a figure of transformation, moving from inherited martial tradition toward an inward, ethical form of courage. His refusal to duel Redmond marks a break with the Southern ideal of vengeance, rejecting the logic of ‘blood for blood’ that had governed his community. Bayard’s recognition that killing would only “add one more ghost to the town”<sup>131</sup> reframes bravery as moral restraint rather than physical dominance. As a result, “Faulkner implies that the true courage lies not in the gunfight but in the refusal to be ruled by it”,<sup>132</sup> dismantling the romanticized Southern heroic ideal that earlier stories sustain. Though Bayard’s choice is painful and ambiguous, it restores the individual as an ethical end rather than a servant of a destructive tradition, affirming a vision that “elevates individual moral responsibility above collective tradition”.<sup>133</sup>

In the narrative construction of “The Evening Sun”, as in the other texts from his collection, thematic and symbolic structures anticipate and reflect Faulkner’s later novelistic architecture, particularly *The Sound and the Fury*. The story revisits an epiphanic moment in the tragic history of the Compson family, evoking what Nancy calls “the terror of the dark”<sup>134</sup>—a fear rooted in abandonment and imminent death. The image of archaic dread functions as an expression of Faulknerian existential anxiety, resonating with Quentin Compson’s belief that “no battle is ever won”.<sup>135</sup> As Bleikasten notes, “Faulkner’s vision of man is essentially tragic; man is caught in a labyrinth of time, memory, guilt and desire”,<sup>136</sup> a vision here condensed into the devastating act of waiting that suspends identity between fate and consciousness. The inclusion of “An Error in Chemistry” and “Smoke” from *The Knight’s Gambit* is justified not only by their apparent detective form but by the central role of Gavin Stevens, who embodies active moral reason and resistance to evil: “I am more interested in justice and human beings than in truth. In my time I have seen truth that was anything under the sun but just, and I have seen justice using tools I wouldn’t want to touch with a ten-foot fence-rail”.<sup>137</sup> This ethical stance affirms Faulkner’s guarded faith in human

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<sup>130</sup> Brooks (1989, p. 297).

<sup>131</sup> Faulkner (1965, p. 26).

<sup>132</sup> Millgate (1978, p. 302).

<sup>133</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 227).

<sup>134</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 257).

<sup>135</sup> Faulkner, (1995, p. 336).

<sup>136</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 87).

<sup>137</sup> Faulkner (2009, pp. 331-332).



endurance—“I refuse to accept [the end of man]”<sup>138</sup>—a belief never triumphant, but shaped by doubt and hope, giving Yoknapatawpha County its enduring dialectical depth.

Reality does not follow an objective or empirical logic but is refracted through individual consciousness, shaped by time, memory, and circumstance. Rejecting traditional realism, Faulkner constructs a world filtered through radical subjectivity. Even in interior monologues spoken by socially marginal or cognitively limited characters, he introduces moments of semantic density—not to maintain psychological realism, but to convey affective truth. Benjy’s assertion in *The Sound and The Fury*, “I wasn’t crying, I was trying to say”<sup>139</sup> exemplifies this impulse, articulating emotional meaning beyond rational language. Faulkner thus seeks not to represent reality mimetically, but to reconstruct it phenomenologically, from within consciousness shaped by suffering and remembrance. As Cleanth Brooks observes, Faulkner “was not interested in the record of events, but in the emotional and psychological impact of those events as experienced by the characters”,<sup>140</sup> a principle that explains why narration often dissolves into fragmented memory and sensation:

That is the substance of remembering—sense, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel not mind, not thought: there is no such thing as memory: the brain recalls just what the muscles dig for: no more, no less; and its resulting sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream.<sup>141</sup>

In Faulkner’s literary vision, aesthetics is marked by the tension between objective reality and the hallucinatory flow of individual consciousness, as his narratives attempt to recompose an unstable existential substance oscillating between the material and the spiritual. His characters are caught in an almost Sisyphean effort to access an essential yet often unapproachable truth, a quest mediated by a capricious memory that alternately illuminates or obscures their ontological path. Memory is not a neutral act of recollection but a deforming force that reshapes the present through past trauma—what Quentin Compson, in *The Sound and The Fury*, calls “the deep anguish of the human heart”.<sup>142</sup> As Pardis Dabashi and Sarah White observe, Faulkner “projects memory not as recollection but as reinvention, a continual shaping of self and world through narrative”,<sup>143</sup> resulting in fragmentary, interrupted, and elliptical structures in which meaning emerges through digressions and returns. Likewise, André Bleikasten notes that “the disjunction between

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<sup>138</sup> Faulkner (1950, p. 8).

<sup>139</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 36).

<sup>140</sup> Brooks (1985, p. 148).

<sup>141</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 44).

<sup>142</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 87).

<sup>143</sup> Dabashi & White (2022, p. 163).



experience and narration, between time lived and time told, is at the core of Faulkner's poetics",<sup>144</sup> accounting for the meandering syntax, shifting perspectives, and referential instability that formally mirror the characters' fractured interiority.

Translating Faulkner's work poses a Herculean challenge due to the fluid, polyphonic, and elliptical nature of his narrative discourse, in which "the language itself becomes a character, imposing its rhythms and resistance upon the reader".<sup>145</sup> This resistance is already dramatized in *The Sound and The Fury*, where Benjy's pre-linguistic perception confesses that "I couldn't see it but I could hear it",<sup>146</sup> foregrounding language as an autonomous agent shaping experience. Faulkner's verbal world is in constant metamorphosis, oscillating between contemplation and chaos, introspection and the collapse of temporal coherence. The narrator is never static, but reconfigures reality through stream of consciousness, refusing linearity and predictability. When Quentin reflects that "Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago",<sup>147</sup> temporality itself collapses into a linguistic event. Sentences fragment and re-knit like discontinuities inner flows, turning memory into a wandering space where "meaning is not located, but approached asymptotically".<sup>148</sup> As John Matthews argues, Faulkner's prose "forces readers into an ethics of delay, where understanding is perpetually deferred".<sup>149</sup> This fragmentary musicality—its syncopated rhythms and silences—creates an initiatory reading experience, evident in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Rosa Coldfield admits that truth emerges only "out of the quiet thunderclap of speculation".<sup>150</sup> Digression, repetition, and obsessive detail intensify rather than disrupt this rhythm, prolonging expectation and producing a suspense in which meaning is not delivered, but arduously sought.

William Faulkner reconfigures traditional narrative structures, using stream of consciousness not merely as an aesthetic device but as an ontological mechanism for exploring selfhood, time, and memory. The Faulknerian sentence, though apparently fragmentary and dissonant, finds unity not in narrative linearity but in the "chain of reactions" of a troubled consciousness oscillating between past trauma and present uncertainty. In *As I Lay Dying*, Darl's assertion that "I don't know what I am"<sup>151</sup> exemplifies trauma as a structural disintegration of subjectivity, where identity collapses under temporal pressure. What may appear as rhetorical repetition or stylistic slowness becomes a means of conveying "the living and instantaneous complexity of the march of consciousness", a narrative mode that exceeds psychological imitation and functions as an "ontological

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<sup>144</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 201).

<sup>145</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 204).

<sup>146</sup> Faulkner (1995, p. 48).

<sup>147</sup> Faulkner (1995, p.183).

<sup>148</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 231).

<sup>149</sup> Matthews (2009, p. 184).

<sup>150</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 56).

<sup>151</sup> Faulkner (1935, p. 105).



reconfiguration of lived and internalized time”.<sup>152</sup> While influenced by Joycean modernism and the interior monologue, Faulkner reformulates these techniques into a paradigm in which “simultaneity” becomes “correlativity”, an interdependence between fragmented consciousness and affective logic. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner insists that events are understood only “by remembering them afterward”,<sup>153</sup> privileging correlation over immediacy. Rather than arbitrary juxtaposition, Faulkner organizes discontinuity through an organic aesthetic principle that transcends subjective chaos, dramatizing, as Millgate states, “consciousness—its battle with dissolution, its desperate clinging to coherence in the face of temporal and existential fragmentation”.<sup>154</sup>

One can discern an intense and subtle will to articulate ideas, evident in minor elements like repeated verbs or syntactic patterns. Verbs such as *to watch* and *to know* become epistemological instruments, marking the shift from perception to understanding, observation to self-awareness. *To watch* signifies existential vigilance, sustained attention to reality, while *to know*, in Faulkner’s sense, transcends facts, becoming a vehicle for recollection, subjective insight, and fragmented truth. As Addie Bundren declares in *As I Lay Dying*, “words are no good; that words don’t ever fit even what they are trying to say at”,<sup>155</sup> showing knowledge severed from linguistic certainty. Andrew McKenna observes, “Faulkner’s language mimics the fractured, incomplete, and often contradictory nature of human understanding”,<sup>156</sup> suggesting the relativity of cognition and the impossibility of absolute knowledge. Pardis Dabashi and Sarah White argue this epistemological instability functions “as a critique of Southern historiography itself”.<sup>157</sup> His labyrinthine, tense syntax mirrors his characters’ ontological restlessness, suspended between memory and present, experience and interpretation. In this regard, “his sentences are acts of groping, as if the narrative itself were feeling its way through the darkness of consciousness”,<sup>158</sup> framing his work as a metaphor for the always-incomplete search for ultimate meaning. Thus, the verb *to know* signals modern epistemological unrest, the fragility of the subject facing an elusive reality. His discourse dramatizes the attempt to transcend finitude, moving toward “a world not entirely knowable, but always immanently present in language”,<sup>159</sup> rendering Faulkner’s syntax and lexicon formulas for an ontology of search.

From a stylistic and hermeneutic perspective, a contrastive analysis of the dominant verbs in Ernest Hemingway’s prose—*to see* and *to feel*—and those recurring in William Faulkner’s narrative universe—*to know* and *to watch*—reveals not just lexical differences but

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<sup>152</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 57).

<sup>153</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 21).

<sup>154</sup> Bleikasten (2017, p. 132).

<sup>155</sup> Faulkner (1935, p. 274).

<sup>156</sup> McKenna (2022, p. 42).

<sup>157</sup> Dabashi & White (2022, p. 137).

<sup>158</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 89).

<sup>159</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 77).



fundamental oppositions in knowledge, affectivity, and reality. Beyond economy versus density, this contrast exposes two incompatible epistemologies. Hemingway works with sensory minimalism rooted in immediate perception, while Faulkner emphasizes a broader, hyperanalytical consciousness. As Cleanth Brooks observes, Faulkner “seems to reject clarity in favor of psychological complexity, often using ‘the ambiguities of the subjunctive mood’ to mirror the uncertainty of human experience.”<sup>160</sup> These ambiguities appear in Faulkner’s lush syntax, where predicates are often followed by adverbial subordinates and complex attributive clauses, portraying reality as potential, relative, and unstable. In *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>161</sup> the conditional phrasing— “maybe you have to know anybody awful well to love them”—exemplifies this modal instability. Faulkner’s frequent use of conditional and subjective verbs, uncertain future tenses, and probability adverbs (*maybe, perhaps, probably*) creates a linguistic framework through which his prose attains an epistemological depth, opening it to what Roland Barthes called “the infinity of interpretation”.<sup>162</sup> Hemingway, in contrast, reduces language to an economy that enacts an ontology of raw fact, “writing what he sees, not what he knows”,<sup>163</sup> producing a poetics of silence, suggestion, and subtext. The difference is thus ontological: Faulkner explores consciousness in flux and memory’s ambiguity, while Hemingway cultivates sensory clarity and the emotional impact of gestures stripped to their essence.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that in William Faulkner’s prose, narrative doesn’t follow rational clarity or a linear construction of time and identity. Instead, it unfolds through a fragmentary, tense, and existential process, where each revealed moment—internal or external—becomes an unstable and problematic form of knowledge. This difficulty is not merely formal but epistemic: the impossibility of a unitary perception, dramatized in Quentin Compson’s admission that he is “a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts”.<sup>164</sup> As Bleikasten notes, “Faulkner does not offer knowledge as a fixed entity but as an experience in flux”,<sup>165</sup> a flux shared by author and character in mutual uncertainty. Between the gropings of consciousness and memory’s hesitations, narrative acquires substance not through clarity, but through errors, repetitions, and approximations that strain truth and perception, evident in Darl Bundren’s statement, “I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not”.<sup>166</sup> Faulkner thus “forces the reader to feel the opacity of time and consciousness”,<sup>167</sup> crafting

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<sup>160</sup> Brooks (1989, p. 145).

<sup>161</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 9).

<sup>162</sup> Barthes (1977, p. 54).

<sup>163</sup> Brooks (1989, p. 174).

<sup>164</sup> Faulkner (1986, p. 14).

<sup>165</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 214).

<sup>166</sup> Faulkner (1935, p. 145).

<sup>167</sup> Millgate (1978, p. 129).



an aesthetic where truth is never absolute but always provisional—a partial, often contradictory instance. The author deliberately renounces omniscience, not to abandon lucidity, but to transfer it to the reader, who reconstructs truth critically, echoing what Michael Gorra’s idea of “the delayed and fractured emergence of meaning”.<sup>168</sup> In this way, “Faulkner’s fiction enacts the very process of groping toward meaning, of forging coherence where none is given”,<sup>169</sup> transforming reading into a hermeneutic act.

At the same time, I have shown that the punctuation of Faulknerian prose, seemingly chaotic and unconventional, is essential to its aesthetic and ontological expression, reflecting the complex relationship with narrative reality. The absence of punctuation in extended passages and its abundance in shorter sequences are not stylistic choices but serve a “profound artistic vision”,<sup>170</sup> in which stream of consciousness outweighs syntactic coherence. In this way, “the very syntax of Faulkner’s prose embodies the struggle to articulate the inarticulable”,<sup>171</sup> and this tension between form and content is not a formalist whim but a refusal to simplify the human condition—a refusal Faulkner makes explicit when he states he writes because he cannot “accept the end of man”.<sup>172</sup> I have argued that the difficulties of translating his work stem from the need to convey a vision where every formal detail shapes a literary consciousness that defies conventions and demands empathetic, interpretive engagement from the reader. In conclusion, I have shown that this formal fragmentation and tension within narrative conventions lie at the core of Faulknerian aesthetics, drawing the reader into the creation of meaning.

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<sup>168</sup> Gorra (2020, p. 195).

<sup>169</sup> Brooks (1989, p. 172).

<sup>170</sup> Bleikasten (1990, p. 112).

<sup>171</sup> Singal (1987, p. 23).

<sup>172</sup> Faulkner (1950, p.8).



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