

The essays in this book are designed to inform, orient, and expand the reader's experience of and engagement with William Faulkner's fourth novel and major work, *The Sound and the Fury*. With eighty years having passed since its original publication, the novel's historical and cultural remoteness can often exacerbate the inaccessibility its regional specificity and stylistic obscurity foster. This volume seeks to address the novel's own contexts, while also exploring relevance it bears to the present moment. The essays herein are largely jargon-free and thus not written for literary critics only, but intended for undergraduates, graduate students, and scholars new to the field as well. Nevertheless, the majority of them present significant new critical insights and so provide more than just grounding in established readings of the novel.

This volume opens with a number of contextual pieces, starting with a general statement on *The Sound and the Fury* by the editor, which provides an overview of its composition history, its major themes, its adaptations, and observations on strategies for reading its difficult pages. There follows a brief biography of William Faulkner by Lorie Watkins Fulton. After these chapters is a section of four essays that provide more specific critical context. The first of these essays is important for those seeking to understand the novel's historical context. David Hein's chapter "The Reverend Mr. Shegog's Easter Sermon: Preaching as Communion in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*" offers one aspect of that history by considering the religious background that informs the Easter service Dilsey Gibson attends. The second essay is important for anyone seeking to understand the history of the critical reception of the novel, as Theresa M. Towner offers an exceptionally insightful guide to the responses of professional critics. Literary critics often view fiction through the lens of a certain critical and theoretical approach, and Christopher Rieger's essay "Outside the Garden: The Natural

World in *The Sound and the Fury*” models an ecocritical reading of the text, showing how nature is something feminized and eroticized and from which the Compson brothers are estranged. This section of the book closes with Gretchen Martin’s reading of *The Sound and the Fury* in the context of a closely related novel also by Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*. Entitled “‘Am I going to have to hear it all again?’ Quentin Compson’s Role as Narratee in *The Sound & the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*,” Martin’s essay contextualizes the novel’s narrative function via a reading of Quentin’s role of listener, or “narratee,” in both novels, showing how *Absalom, Absalom!* is embedded in *The Sound and the Fury* in a way that makes Quentin’s suicide particularly meaningful.

The remaining essays offer a kaleidoscope of critical readings, beginning with two essays that delve into the problematics of narrative in the text. First, Frédérique Spill’s “‘And Then Everything Sort of Rolled Away’: Reading *The Sound and the Fury*, or the Acceptance of Bewilderment,” considers the effect of the novel’s style; taking her cue from the bewilderment that colors the cognitively disabled Benjy’s engagement with the world around him, Spill explains that the novel as a whole is designed to keep the reader bewildered, ensconcing him or her in what Faulkner would call Benjy-like “idiocy.” Ultimately, Spill argues, the novel is a puzzle with certain key pieces missing, and this incompleteness is part of the novel’s modernist aesthetic—an aesthetic to be embraced and explored even as it frustrates. Cheryl Lester’s “Modernist Narration and Everyday Life in *The Sound and the Fury*” provides a reading of narrative structuring that employs narrative theory to consider Faulkner’s complex rendering of interracial conflict in the everyday life of Jim Crow Mississippi. The specific concept she latches onto is the “structure of feeling,” highlighting the often overlooked textual element of the golf course built on the Compson pasture as a site of local cultural contention.

The next two essays build on Lester’s focus on the material by narrowing in on the function of money and the financial in the novel. Sascha Morrell reads the elements of capitalism with riveting sensibility in “Caddy, Capitalism, and Chronology in *The Sound and*

the Fury.” Morrell shows us that, for her brothers, Caddy Compson registers the socio-economic shift of Mississippi from plantation culture and its vestiges to a capitalistic system that, in certain ways, ill-fits the literal and cultural landscape. Accompanying this shift is a crisis of time that runs throughout the novel. In a similar vein, Caroline S. Miles’ “Money and Masculinity: Economies of Fear in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*” considers the ways that shifts in economic systems in the novel’s moment affect notions and performances of masculinity, with each of the Compson brothers grappling with changing concepts of the relation of labor to the ontology of being a man.

In yet another intriguing duo, the essays by Sarah Robertson and Ren Denton explore secrets of race and sex in Faulkner’s novel. In a careful and felicitous movement, Robertson in “Reading Race and Miscegenation in *The Sound and the Fury*” singles out Dilsey’s comment to Luster that he has Compson blood, in order to point out a larger fact of plantation culture—that there is a deep interconnection of its white and black members. Robertson specifically examines the subtleties of the fear of race-mixing in the case of the black characters T.P. and Versh, the latter of whom comes too close to Caddy sexually for her brother Quentin’s comfort. In fact, the memory of the interaction between his sister and Versh informs the metaphorical relation to blackness that so fuels Quentin’s anger against the “Blackguard” Dalton Ames. Denton carries Robertson’s insights a step further by actually reading Miss Quentin Compson as the biracial offspring of T.P. and Caddy in “‘Skeered to Holler’: Secret Lovers Hot and Hidden Between the Narrative Gaps of *The Sound and the Fury*.” Reading into the tantalizing caesura Faulkner writes into the novel, Denton presents an original and provocative reading of the intersections of race, female sexuality, and misogyny.

The final three essays employ critical approaches of the most unique nature. John B. Padgett’s “‘Trying to Say’: Modernism, Loss, and the Unspeakability of War in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*” reads the novel in the context of two wars, the United States Civil War and World War I. Although *The Sound and the Fury* is not what might be thought of as a historical “war” novel,

Faulkner's employment of both general and specific elements from these wars greatly informs and buttresses the narrative and the narrating style to form a kind of subterranean discourse of warfare. In an entirely different and cutting-edge direction, Simone Maria Puleo approaches the text through the lens of the emerging field of fat studies in his essay entitled "'Fat as You Is': Jason Compson's Bullied Body in *The Sound and the Fury*." Ferreting out an obscure statement about Jason's being fat as a child, Puleo develops an interesting new way of thinking about how and why Jason behaves the way he does; in a country in which fatness carries large cultural implications, exclusions, and the threat of being bullied, the shaping of so vicious a personality as Jason's comes as no surprise. The essays close with Joseph R. Urgo's exceptionally interesting "Faulkner's Pedagogy; Quentin's Ghost: Uncertainty, Revision, and the Roots of Intellectual Vitality." This major Faulkner scholar undertakes a reading of Quentin Compson as a character who is representative of Faulkner's ideas about schooling and student life, generally both in the time the novel was written and also in the time of this book's publication, when efforts to define the role of colleges and universities (and, within them, the humanities) in society has become particularly stressed. Like Martin, Urgo reads Quentin across novels, examining him in *Absalom, Absalom!* as well as *The Sound and the Fury* in order to explore Quentin as a student.

Following the essays are useful resources. A grasp of the overall movements of a writer's career can be extremely helpful in seeing the significance of a single novel, and this book provides a chronological overview of Faulkner's life and writing. For an even more specific glance at his career, there follows a list of his major works. While Towner's essay provides a wonderful guide to other texts of Faulkner criticism, a general bibliography of additional works on the novel has also been provided. With all these components, the reader of this book should be well equipped to discuss this novel and its reception, while also having read some of the most up-to-date Faulkner criticism.

“Trying to Say”: Modernism, Loss, and the Unspeakability of War in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*

John B. Padgett

The publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 has long been marked as a watershed moment in modernist literature. The fragmented nature of the narrative, the stream of consciousness method, and the overwhelming focus on *loss* are just a few of the modernist hallmarks that Faulkner injected into this, his fourth novel. Sometimes forgotten today, however, is just how much war—specifically, World War I, the “Great War”—aided in the development of modernist aesthetics. The devastation of the war, on both the physical landscape and on the psyches of those who experienced it, coupled with the war’s many ironies—its being called a “war to end all wars,” for example—had a resounding impact on the world of arts and letters. Of course, any enterprise as large as the Great War would provide ample creative ideas for writers. But the war’s more profound impact on literature had to do with inculcating the experimental and avant-garde aesthetics and practices of modernism, in large measure because of the inadequacy of language to convey the enormity and scope of the devastation.

Like many writers of his generation, Faulkner was greatly affected by the war in Europe. Breaking out just as he was reaching adulthood, the war factored prominently in much of his earliest poetry and fiction. But the Great War was only one of *two* wars that held great personal and artistic interest to Faulkner. The other was the Civil War, which had played a major role in his own family as well as on the history of his native region, the South, and on the history of the nation itself. Over the course of his career, Faulkner would return again and again to *war* as both a subject and a theme in his fiction, concentrating most often on these two wars. The subject in Faulkner’s war-related fiction is seldom about actual battles or battlefield conditions; his concern, in novels like

Flags in the Dust and *The Unvanquished*, is more often about the effects, psychological and otherwise, that war wreaks upon those who experience it. Thematically, he sometimes takes a wider sweep toward historical significances, as he does for the Civil War, especially with regards to race and slavery, in novels like *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*. However, Faulkner's use of war extends beyond these obvious examples. In many of his works, Faulkner implements allusions, images, or historical facts of war in a much more subtle manner—in effect, channeling the multitude of emotions, experiences, and language of war to other subjects to achieve some desired aesthetic or thematic result. Though it would be wrong to characterize these works as “war” novels, war is present in these works just under the surface, suffusing their emotional and psychological fabric.

The Sound and the Fury is not generally thought of in terms of war, despite the allusion of its title to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which is very much a “war” drama, beginning in the midst of one civil war and ending in another; it is no accident that the two key words forming Faulkner's title, “sound” and “fury,” have, over the centuries, become verbal signifiers of modern warfare. Nevertheless, “war” is a hidden, but important, part of the story Faulkner is trying to tell in *The Sound and the Fury*. Both the Great War and the Civil War factor into this novel, and these historical conflicts correlate with two of the underlying themes of this novel, which in turn are also hallmarks of American modernism: the memory of a glorious past compared to a dissolute present and an overwhelming, inexpressible sense of loss. In some ways, *The Sound and the Fury* is Faulkner's most introspective novel, fully enveloping the consciousness of the three Compson brothers for all but the final section of the novel, and at no point, do any of their utterances, or the fourth section's omniscient narrator, pertain explicitly to historical facts of war. Nonetheless, images of and allusions to war permeate this novel, contrasting a T. S. Eliot-like attention to past historical glories, especially to the American Civil War and the subsequent “Lost Cause” ideology, with a more modern sense of malaise and loss following the Great War. The profound absence of war in this novel actually parallels

in some ways what is the most significant theme of the book: the tragic, systematic removal throughout the novel of its most vibrant and loving character, Caddy.

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Of the two wars evoked in the novel, the Civil War is the more obvious. John T. Matthews suggests that, with this novel, Faulkner for the first time weds his “growing interest in his southern region’s history with his continuing commitment to modernist aesthetics” (14). In that regard, Faulkner continues a trend he had actually begun with his third novel, *Flags in the Dust*, but *The Sound and the Fury* marks a very different, much more personal and inward approach to regional history than the earlier novel.

The Sound and the Fury makes several deliberate allusions to the Civil War, such as the character Deacon, a black veteran of the Grand Army of the Republic, or “G. A. R.” Quentin considers him a close acquaintance, even trusting him with his suicide note because he, too, is a native southerner. Early in his section, Quentin’s roommate, Shreve, teases Quentin when they see Deacon wearing his G. A. R. uniform, marching in a parade on Decoration Day (a forerunner of the modern Memorial Day). Shreve’s taunt—“There now. Just look at what your grandpa did to that poor old nigger” (82)—is one of only a few references in the novel proper to the Compson family’s Civil War history: as Faulkner specified in greater detail in the “Appendix” to the novel first published in *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946, Quentin’s grandfather was a Confederate general “who failed at Shiloh in ’62 and failed again though not so badly at Resaca in ’64” (329).¹

But the novel makes other, more subtle Civil War references as well, one of which is hinted at by the appendix’s reference to Shiloh: two of the novel’s four sections coincide with the dates of that battle.

As a native Mississippian, growing up at the height of nostalgia and memorializing of the war in the first decades of the twentieth century, Faulkner had a great deal of intimate knowledge about the battle of Shiloh.² The April 6–7, 1862, battle was significant for a number of reasons. Not only was it the first major battle in the

western theater of the Civil War, it was also by far the bloodiest battle of the war itself to that date. More men lost their lives in the two-day battle than had in all three previous wars—the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War—combined. The losses for the North were profound, but the losses were cataclysmic for the South: of the Union’s sixty-two thousand soldiers, some thirteen thousand were killed, wounded, or missing, whereas the Confederates lost eleven-thousand six-hundred ninety-four of its forty-four thousand men (Reaves 35).

On the first day of the battle, the Confederates launched a surprise attack on the Union Army under the command of Ulysses S. Grant near Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River. The Confederates, under the command of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, planned to sweep between the Union and the landing, cutting them off from a path of retreat. The Confederates met heavy resistance, however, along a sunken road; it was here, in the “Hornet’s nest,” that fighting was most intense. Fighting was also intense in a peach orchard just beginning to bloom. Not far from the peach orchard, Gen. Johnston was struck by a bullet in his femoral artery, and though a simple tourniquet could have saved his life, he had dispatched his personal surgeon to care for some wounded Union prisoners, and before he could return, Johnston had bled to death.

Despite Johnston’s death, the Confederate army—now under the command of Braxton Bragg—succeeded in pushing the Union army back to a line near the landing, though their failure to cut off Grant from the landing would have devastating consequences. Throughout the night, reinforcements arrived by boat, and with these reinforcements, on the morning of April 7, Grant was able to launch a successful counterattack, which eventually swept the Confederates from the field. By the end of the battle that night, Bragg had no choice but to retreat back into Mississippi.

What Confederate soldiers faced on those April dates in 1862 correlate loosely with the events that unfold in the corresponding sections of Faulkner’s novel: namely, victory, defeat, and recognition of loss. April 6 represents the height of “victory” for the Confederates during the battle, though of course it was to be a fleeting victory. In the

novel, Jason's section represents a similar illusory victory, for he has been stealing the money Caddy sends for his niece for years. Jason meets considerable "resistance" throughout his section, but overall, the tone of his section is one of haughty disregard for his enemies. His pursuit of Quentin and the man in the red tie, in fact, bears a superficial resemblance to the key failure of the Confederates on April 6: they were unable to cut off the Union forces from Pittsburg Landing, in much the same manner that Jason could not prevent Miss Quentin and her companion from doubling back to their car and letting the air out of his tire. By contrast, April 7, corresponding to Benjy's section, saw the gains made by the South the day before the turn to devastating defeat. As in Jason's section, nothing specific ties this section to the historical facts of Shiloh, but the general movement throughout Benjy's section is defeat: he returns time after time to moments of personal loss, death, and disappointment. The utter incomprehension and general sense of malaise felt in this opening section of the novel mirror, in some ways, what the defeated southerners experienced on the second day of Shiloh. And Miss Quentin's departure that night (with the money from Jason's room) is representative of the final removal of all traces of Caddy in the novel, though of course that loss will not fully be felt until the last section.

The final section of the novel is dated April 8, which historically corresponds to the Confederates' retreat into Mississippi and their gradual recognition of the tremendous losses incurred by the previous two days. Unlike the frenzied stream-of-consciousness narration and pitched battles in the sections told by Benjy and Jason, this section, presented by an omniscient narrator, is quiet by contrast; even the opening sentence evokes something of the ominous portentousness and quiet resignation of the Confederate army's retreat after the battle: "The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of gray light out of the northeast which, instead of dissolving into moisture, seemed to disintegrate into minute and venomous particles, like dust" (265). In one sentence, Faulkner captures a great deal of the southern mood on that April morning. Even the color, "gray," and direction of movement is generally accurate: the battlefield is

northeast of Corinth and Oxford—and presumably, the fictional Jefferson.

It is in the final section of this novel that the full scope of loss becomes clear. With the departure of Miss Quentin, Jason discovers the theft of the money he has secretly been pocketing from Caddy's monthly checks, and he is defeated both figuratively (in his conversation with the sheriff) and physically (in his fight with the old man in the Pullman car) in his attempts to recover it. It is for Dilsey, however, to recognize the more profound losses that have occurred. As she listens to the Reverend Shegog preach his Easter sermon, it dawns on her that the Compson family is doomed. "I've seed de first en de last," she says. "I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (297).

Even the date of Quentin's section, June 2, has a tantalizing Civil War connection to Gen. Edmund Kirby Smith, who in 1863 had been made commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department for the Confederacy. Despite the string of surrenders by Confederate forces in the East in 1865, Smith's forces continued to skirmish with some success against Union forces. The last man to be killed in the Civil War—Private John J. Williams of the 34th Indiana—died in a skirmish on May 13, 1865, in which the Confederates were victorious (Ward 393). But it was, of course, a hollow victory. Following the capture of Jefferson Davis in Georgia on May 10, Smith had little recourse left but to capitulate, and on May 26, Smith's chief of staff, acting on his authority, surrendered the forces under Smith's command. One week later—on June 2, 1865—Smith made it official by signing the surrender papers himself on board the Federal steamer *Fort Jackson* (Foote 1021).

Thus, Quentin, the character in the novel who is most tortured by the passage of time, and especially on the present's failure to live up to some imagined past ideal of courage and honor and pride, chooses to commit suicide on what can credibly be called the last day of the Civil War. Moreover, the war ended on water, in which Quentin has chosen to end his life.

The fact that dates of the novel's four sections correspond with those of historical events adds to the richly allusive and intertextual

fabric of the novel. Given the large number of allusions in the novel, at the very least, the Shiloh connection was a fortunate coincidence of the calendar for 1928, allowing Faulkner to make full use of both the historical facts of the war and the mytho-religious facets of Easter to contribute a deeper dimension to the novel. In *The Sound and the Fury*, which Faulkner would later proclaim to be his “most splendid failure,” Faulkner is writing about the slow, steady decline of a family prominent before the Civil War, and in a gesture that succinctly demonstrates Faulkner’s belief in the persistence of the past into the present, he sets the present days of the novel on the anniversary of two of the South’s most splendid failures—its first major defeat in battle at Shiloh, and the official date of its final surrender.

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The Civil War connection in the novel contributes to the historical texture of the long decline of a once-powerful family, but in some ways, the more recent Great War contributes an even more powerful theme to the novel: how to express a loss so great that it cannot be put into words.

To understand the significance of the Great War in this novel, it is worthwhile to review Faulkner’s own complicated relationship with this war and how it shaped his work prior to writing *The Sound and the Fury*. When the United States entered the war in 1917, Faulkner was nineteen years old and in love with Estelle Oldham. She and Faulkner wished to marry, but her family would not approve the union, particularly when they learned she had flirtatiously agreed to marry another man with a more promising future than Faulkner. Heartbroken, Faulkner intended to join the thousands of young men signing up for military service. He felt a call to serve, but more important than merely serving, Faulkner wished to emulate the manner if not the specific method of attaining battlefield glory as his great-grandfather, William Clark Falkner, had done as a cavalry officer in the Civil War. To achieve this goal, Faulkner joined the Canadian Royal Air Force, the successor to the British Royal Flying Corps, which popular culture at the time was characterizing as the

Chronology of William Faulkner's Life_____

- 1897** William Cuthbert Falkner is born on September 25 in New Albany, Mississippi.
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- 1902** The Falkner family moves to Oxford, Mississippi.
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- 1905** William Falkner enters Oxford Grade School.
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- 1906** Falkner's paternal grandmother, Sallie Murray Falkner, dies.
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- 1907** Falkner's maternal grandmother, Lelia Dean Swift Butler, dies.
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- 1914** Although he skips school regularly, Falkner begins reading modern poets under the tutelage of his friend Phil Stone.
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- 1915** Falkner drops out of high school.
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- 1916** Falkner works as a clerk in the Falkner Bank.
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- 1917** Falkner's drawings are published in the University of Mississippi yearbook.
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- 1918** Falkner's childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham, marries Cornell Franklin under pressure of her parents. Falkner leaves Mississippi to live with Stone in New Haven, Connecticut, where Stone attends Yale University. Adding a "u" to his name, Faulkner fakes a British accent and gains acceptance into the Royal Air Force, stationed in Toronto, Canada. He is discharged from the RAF at the end of World War I without having flown a mission and returns to Oxford.

Works by William Faulkner

Soldiers' Pay, 1926

Mosquitoes, 1927

Sartoris, 1929

The Sound and the Fury, 1929

As I Lay Dying, 1930

Sanctuary, 1931

Light in August, 1932

Pylon, 1935

Absalom, Absalom!, 1936

The Unvanquished, 1938

The Wild Palms, 1939

The Hamlet, 1940

Go Down, Moses, 1942

Intruder in the Dust, 1948

Knight's Gambit, 1949

Collected Stories of William Faulkner, 1950

Requiem for a Nun, 1951

A Fable, 1954

The Town, 1957

The Mansion, 1959

The Reivers, 1962

Flags in the Dust, 1973 (original unabridged version of *Sartoris*)

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