



William Faulkner's Originality as an Innovator in Literary Craftsmanship: A Reflection on His Nobel Prize Banquet Speech

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BACKGROUND

Nobel Prize Winner for Literature 1950 William Faulkner (1897-1962) is regarded as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. He was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897, and grew up in nearby Oxford, Mississippi, where his father owned a livery stable. He dropped away from formal education and grew up to be a self-made individual devoted to voracious reading first using his own discretion and later under the guidance of a family friend (Britannica, Accessed in May 2022).

His originality lies in his pioneering use of the stream-of-consciousness technique as well as the range and depth of his characterization representative of people in almost all social strata present in the postbellum American South. "His artistic commitment to realism undermined the prejudices that he otherwise accepted: In simply depicting the folkways of white supremacy without flinching, the argument goes, he held them up to scrutiny and revealed their inherent ludicrousness" (Kindley, 2020). The narratological characteristics of his creative work can be confidently attributed to his formative life as a self-disciplined literate growing independently at home, where the room for his perception of reality getting affected by a third party used to be minimal.

His association with the Modernist and Southern Gothic literary movements is evident in his novels, the majority of which are set in the geographical and sociopolitical landscape where he led his life. In his most technically sophisticated craftsmanship, he uses Modernist writing techniques that depend on stream-of-consciousness narrative patterns developed and maintained through unreliable narrators (Mambrol, 2018).

The idea behind these applications can be explained as an effort to enable the reader to remain independent, conscious, and critical throughout the reading without getting carried away by a setting, an episode, or a character that impinges on his/her contemplation.

"Let the writer take up surgery or bricklaying if he is interested in technique. There is no mechanical way to get the writing done, no shortcut. The young writer

would be a fool to follow a theory. Teach yourself by your own mistakes; people learn only by error. The good artist believes that nobody is good enough to give him advice. He has supreme vanity. No matter how much he admires the old writer, he wants to beat him" (Faulkner, 1956).

These remarks he made in an interview with Jean Stein in 1956, actualize in his style, which allows the writer as well as the reader tremendous freedom to proceed in a phenomenological perspective about the geographical, social, cultural, and anthropological as well as political and economic realities his novels deal with.

FAULKNER'S LITERARY CAREER

A prolific writer, William Faulkner wrote numerous novels, screenplays, poems, and short stories. His novels - *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Wild Palms* (1939), *Go Down Moses* (1942), *The Rivers* (1962), and his screenplays - *Flesh* (1932), *Today We Live* (1933), *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), *Submarine Patrol* (1938), *Air Force* (1943), *To Have and Have Not* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and his collections of poems and short stories respectively have all been well-received by literary audiences all over the world (Biblio, Accessed in May 2022).

In his novel, *The Sound and the Fury* (1933), he introduces his innovation through the application of the stream-of-consciousness technique that intermingles his characters' flow of inner thoughts as they are engaged in profound interactions in their respective roles. As the characters are all supposed to play substantive roles in the narration, his stories are often told from the point of view of several characters engendered not only in the authorial descriptions full of imagery but also in the colloquialisms that appear in the dialogues they produce (Hellström, 1950).

The novel experience of the polyphonic narrative textures achieved by his readership all over the world has gained ground in the later literary creations where multiple points of view and heteroglossic renditions support dramatic discourse in the storyline. In his Nobel Prize Banquet Speech, Faulkner soberly conveys the message of his labour.



FAULKNER'S NOBEL PRIZE BANQUET SPEECH: A CRITIQUE

Faulkner opens his Nobel Prize Banquet Speech, with an emphasis on his willingness to accept the prize solely for "a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit ... to create ... something which did not exist before."

His deep but accurate perception of the variety and complexity of "the human spirit" emerges from the mention of "the agony and sweat" that have gone into the meticulous designing and structuring of the body of work in question and his sense of its epistemological and ontological originality, emerge from the assessment of his work as "something which did not exist before". So, it is understood that the body of his literary work is his mirror.

"His subhuman and superhuman figures, tragic or comic in a macabre way, emerge from his mind with a reality that few existing people – even those nearest to us – can give us, and they move in a milieu whose odours of subtropical plants, ladies' perfumes, Negro sweat, and the smell of horses and mules penetrate immediately even into a Scandinavian's warm and cosy den. As a painter of landscapes he has the hunter's intimate knowledge of his own hunting-ground, the topographer's accuracy, and the impressionist's sensitivity" (Hellström, 1950).

What Faulkner intends here is to draw attention to his reflections on the human spirit, in order to perceive his mission in life as a human being. The intention of his writings is further conveyed in the phrase "not for glory and least of all for profit" which signifies his devotion to humanity as a writer and artist, and his disregard for being famous or financially rich by means of his career as a writer.

While accepting the award as something entrusted to him personally, he treats its financial value as part of the homage his work deserves in a decent human society for "the purpose and significance of its origin". Here, he does not use the term "genius" to call his intellectual stamina and creative expertise although he feels compelled to share with others the recognition the prize accorded to him. His humility is the major influence in the control of his language and diction.

Doing justice to the prize, he pragmatically makes use of the critical acclaim he has achieved thereby "as a pinnacle" from which he can address his audience full of social awareness. He takes the opportunity to convey his inspirational message to "the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail" that he has been all his life working on. It is also clear that he expects some of them to follow in his footsteps to become Nobel laureates. Thus, rather than imposing himself on others, he tries to share his views with them, in the expectation that they will follow suit with him as a mature writer and one day reach the same goals he achieved.

Moreover, he uses the pedestal to declare his perception of the human tragedy precipitated by the physical fear that had

pervaded universally by the 1940s as experienced during World Wars I and II and is still threatening all lives on earth, in general, today in even more sophisticated fashion and with an even greater emission of force and destruction. The modification it has effected on the human psyche is conveyed in the descriptive phrase, "that we can even bear it".

Faulkner is positivistically correct in the declarative, "There are no longer problems of the spirit." Obviously, humans have conquered the earth in many ways, and they have left nothing else to be exploited. The sarcasm initiated by this ironic indication of the pioneer spirit the American industrialists have demonstrated in their massive colonization schemes reaches an anticlimax in the ever-emerging and reemerging dreadful question "When will I be blown up?" Thus, he expresses concern about the mid-20th Century writers' departure from naturalism and an embrace of materialism.

In the curious atmosphere, he creates thus, he points out the major drawback in most young writers of the time caused by their tendency to overlook "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself". The implication he makes in this criticism of the major lacuna in the writings of his younger generation draws attention to the success of his own work. According to him, the human heart in conflict is alone "worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat". He provides here a clue to what is worth labouring upon in exercises of literary craftsmanship. It is surmised that, in the absence of any probe into the behaviour of the human heart, all narratives become trash in no time.

Faulkner sounds didactic in the suggestions he conveys to the young men and women he aims at addressing in his speech. Using the auxiliary of compulsion "must" in two consecutive statements, he emphasizes what he expects the young people to do: they "must learn" the problems of heart again, and they "must teach" themselves "that the basest of all things is to be afraid..." Then he suggests ways of coping with the monstrosity of "fear" that annihilates the essence of humanity, heinously infiltrating the mind in various fake human guises and ruthlessly pulverizing the human relationships in society, turning every human into a hunter of another human. He exposes thus the detrimental behaviour of fear that reduces or ruins the verisimilitudinous function of a work of art and prescribes the materials that should constitute a successful story to remain eternal and universal.

According to Faulkner, stories that lack "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths" are destined to be ephemeral and doomed and that shortens their lifespan. Also, he elaborates on the truths in terms of "love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice" which do not appear in any superfluously fake versions but only remain the genuinely solid human emotions that lead to dramatic developments in human environments. "Until he does so, he labours under a curse." He articulates in such strong and threatening terms the indispensability of cultivating a

genuine commitment to the sincere and creative exposition of true human emotions through the art of fiction. What happens to the practice of writing when authors ignore the problems of the heart appears in the pathetic workmanship he describes with cynicism:

“He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands” (Faulkner, 1950)

Faulkner portrays the deterioration and decadence that mushroom in narrative literature in the absence of authorial involvement in establishing social justice as inspired by an authentic perception of “the problems of the heart”. He vertically conveys his message to the younger generation that he looks forward to being honest in their workmanship. The rhetoric he uses to present the anomalies that would transpire in superficial literary craftsmanship in the absence of genuine research into human behaviour is simply provocative. In the antithesis presented in an alliteration “not of love but of lust”, he implies the kind of conceptual confusion the stories suffer from when human impulses are taken for granted. In the same vein, he presents narrations of “defeats” without any moral losses and those of “victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion”; “griefs ... on no universal bones” and writings “not of the heart but of the glands”. Thus, Faulkner warns about the business of creative writing being reduced to an unpleasant and banal mundane venture focused on making money along with a bogus reputation.

What would happen to the writer if he or she did not familiarize himself or herself with the problems of the heart in conflict? Faulkner answers that, if he or she did not take heed of what is going on, the writer will turn into a helpless onlooker or bystander closing his or her eyes upon “the end of man”. He exposes thus the intellectual inertia that dominates the realm of fiction in the guise of greed for easy wealth and passion for cheap popularity.

Faulkner's intellectual bravery emerges in his well-made protest, “I decline to accept the end of man”. He supports it with a prediction of the signs of human existence prevailing even after the end of the world.

“It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking” (Faulkner, 1950)

He identifies language as the greatest potential of the human that sustains active human existence and ensures human immortality. The value he attaches in this manner to human language and the emphasis he makes on the mastery of the

language through familiarization with the problems of the heart befit the occasion of celebrating his genius as a writer.

“His perfect command over the resources of the language can – and often does – lead him to pile up words and associations which try the reader's patience in an exciting or complicated story. But this profusion has nothing to do with literary flamboyance. Nor does it merely bear witness to the abounding agility of his imagination; in all their richness, every new attribute, every new association is intended to dig deeper into the reality which his imaginative power conjures up” (Hellström, 1950).

He continues his protest further in more caustic terms, “I refuse to accept this.” Then he presents what he perceives about human existence, “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.” This highlights the tendency to vegetate manifest in certain human behaviours. The radical nature expected of a fully-grown human appears in the argument Faulkner makes. “He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.” He acknowledges the distinguished status humans enjoy among all forms of life, based on the quality of human conscience which empowers humans in their zeal to generate compassion, sacrifice, and endurance for the sake of all other living beings.

He articulates the duty of the poet and the writer as an outstanding obligation to humanity, which one qualifies to undertake after so much preparatory work on cultivating one's values and morals.

“It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honour and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past” (Faulkner, 1950).

What Faulkner has been doing throughout his eventful literary career emerges from the above definition of the duty entrusted to the poet or the writer that focuses on the fundamentals of humanity named as courage, honour, hope, pride, compassion, pity, and sacrifice, which distinguish the humans from other species. The concluding line of his speech rightly identifies the enormous power of the poet's voice in supporting and sustaining the human's capacity to “endure and prevail” till eternity. When the substance of the poet's or the writer's voice is perfect in the sense of the values being conveyed and promoted, the voice will take care of its function in resuscitating humanity.

CONCLUSION

The substance of Faulkner's lifelong literary endeavour can be illustrated through his strict adherence to the precept of advocating and promoting the fundamentals of humanity named in his own words as “courage, honour, hope, pride, compassion, pity, and sacrifice”. Maybe, a character is a powerful member of the elite or an underprivileged associate

of the raffraff, what matters is his or her commitment to the sustenance of the noble fundamentals of humanity. Thereby they become heroes imposing their command of respect till eternity. The lesson Faulkner conveyed in his Nobel Prize Banquet Speech can be interpreted so for the benefit of the upcoming writers, who are supposed to conduct themselves with tremendous responsibility to fight the evils in the environment and preserve humanity as well as life in general.

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