



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

59 | Autumn 2012

Special Issue: The Short Story and Cinema

---

# Faulkner's Modernist Short Story in the Age of the Silent Movie

Jacques Pothier

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1319>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2012

ISBN: 0294-0442

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Jacques Pothier, « Faulkner's Modernist Short Story in the Age of the Silent Movie », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 59 | Autumn 2012, Online since 01 December 2014, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1319>

---

This text was automatically generated on 3 December 2020.

© All rights reserved

---

# Faulkner's Modernist Short Story in the Age of the Silent Movie

Jacques Pothier

---

- 1 Adapting short stories to the screen involves complex operations that go far beyond translation from one medium to another. Thinking in terms of adaptation seems to imply that the short story and the screen could be two media trying to make the best of “real” plot and character material that would precede these cultural creations, waiting for the medium or media that would reveal it to the reader/audience. Obviously this is not the case: the short story or the film are not the containers of a neutral plot in search of a writer/producer, but each creation is inseparable from the features of the medium in which it is created. It is therefore better to think of adaptation as recreation.
- 2 Now, while it is more common to think of the initial creation as a short story, and of the later recreation of the material as a film-script, obviously many short stories were composed after films had become a common experience of the general public, so it is legitimate to wonder to what extent short stories of the modernist period onward may have been influenced, if not altered by the techniques of narration and composition developed by the movies.
- 3 The remarks I propose to develop here are based on the example of William Faulkner, one of the modernist writers who were at the same time major figures in the history of literature and had a long and repeated experience in the movie industry throughout his career. Faulkner was the author of more than a hundred short stories and spent an accumulation of approximately ten years in Hollywood working for the movie industry as a screenwriter, scene-doctor and plain buddy of a few directors—Howard Hawks in particular<sup>1</sup>.
- 4 While it may be argued with considerable strength that Faulkner picked many plot ideas or characters from the cinematographic plots he was exposed to, as from all the fiction he read voraciously, his personal experience with the profession suggested or provided remarkably few unquestionably traceable plot ideas. Only one short story out of well over a hundred was set in the world of Hollywood—that is “Golden Land”

(1935). But there is evidence that Faulkner was deeply aware of the profound influence the cinema had in the everyday life of his fellow citizens, and it is the place of the cinema in his work before he ever took the train to Hollywood that I would like to draw attention to. In this essay I would like to draw attention to three features about Faulkner's short stories: the cinematic *montage*; the presence of silent movies in the plots; and the expressionist use of establishing shots as adapted in Faulkner's early fiction.

## I. *Montage* in Short Stories

- 5 As Robert Butler has claimed here and before, there is a certain kinship between some techniques of literary writing and film. But some special features of the short story genre make it even closer to the cinema than other types of fiction writing.
- 6 *Montage* is one of them. Film makers discovered early on that it was not systematically necessary, actually not necessary at all, to explain the transition between sequences by squeezing in an intertitle or title card. The viewer could be trusted to make sense of the shift from one scene, even from one time period to another without the literary crutch of a clumsy "Meanwhile, back at the ranch..." Not that scenes did not need to be divided: but the juxtaposition of shots with nothing but blunt cuts between them could create dynamic effects and contribute to meaning in interesting ways, and you could play with the psychological effect of consecution. As early as Edwin S. Porter's *Great Train Robbery* (1903), this being the generally accepted first occurrence, it was discovered that by splicing together two shots you created in the viewer's consciousness a subjective contextual relationship—something that was further explored by the famous Kuleshov experiment.
- 7 Now some writers of short stories had reached this awareness before. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while the common career of short stories was to be published in magazines and then to be collected, short story writers and their editors became aware that the order in which short stories was presented in a collection mattered, even though there might be absolutely no connections between the plots, atmospheres or subject matter. It had an aesthetic value, it could strongly contribute to the effect on the reader, and moreover it could add to meaning by shifting emphasis with minimal imprint but strong effect.
- 8 In 1856, when Herman Melville, one of Faulkner's favorite writers, put together some of the short stories he had published in 1853 or 1854 in *Putnam's Magazine* as "Benito Cereno and other stories," which included the now famous "Bartleby, the Scrivener", his first idea was to provide a preface, as was customary at the time, but he eventually preferred not to. On January 19, 1856, he wrote to Dix & Edwards, his publishers:
 

During my talk with Mr Dix I volunteered something about supplying some sort of prefatory matter, with a new title to the Collection; but upon less immature consideration, judged that both those steps are not only unnecessary, but might prove unsuitable.<sup>2</sup>
- 9 Four weeks later (February 16), he had changed his mind:
 

The new title selected for the proposed volume is "The Piazza Tales" and the accompanying piece ("The Piazza") as giving that name to the book, is intended to come first in order. I think, with you, that "Bartleby" had best come next.

- 10 Appended next to the prefatory “Piazza,” “Bartleby” was not just the story of its title character—a clerk stifled by the weight of the big city jungle—but suggested identification between the retired sea-captain enjoying the picturesque view of the world from the piazza of his country-house, and the “elderly lawyer” who tried to make sense of Bartleby. Included in the collection, the story shifted emphasis from Bartleby to the narrator and his estrangement from his familiar world. This process of reverberation placed emphasis on the flawed gaze of the more fortunate, even when they thought of themselves as benevolent and enlightened social agents, and how their point of view distorted while it attempted to clarify the story’s meaning, as in the segmented title of the story—“Bartleby, the Scrivener, A Story of Wall Street”—that turns out to be like three tentative titles to the story, as if the narrator could not choose between three ways of focusing on the tragedy of Bartleby as that of an individual, of an occupation, or of a socio-economic milieu.
- 11 When arranging short stories, authors and their editors are now routinely aware that the juxtaposition of short stories within one volume creates important interactions between the stories, as long of course as the reader accepts to read them in the pre-ordained order<sup>3</sup>. Melville’s sensibility was pre-modern, but it may have taken the silent movie to massively introduce this pattern of radical discontinuity in literary fiction. So Faulkner need not have watched films to adopt the techniques of montage. This technique was to find its climax for Faulkner in the composition of the novel *The Wild Palms*, which is made up of ten chapters alternating between two plots that do not interfere with each other, except through the thematic echoes that their juxtaposition may create.

## II. Silent Movies in Faulkner

- 12 My second point is about the sheer presence of the screen in the plot motifs of Faulkner stories. The 1931 short story “Dry September” is one of Faulkner’s most commonly anthologized ones: the story begins in the context of a stifling sixty-two days of dry heat that, the reader may easily understand, have made the townspeople somewhat tired and irritated. A group of men in the barbershop are discussing an indefinable “something” that happened to one Minnie Cooper, a middle-aged woman, in relation with a black man. The short story is divided, like “A Rose for Emily”, into five sections, alternating narratives of contemporary events and glimpses of the female character’s past, throwing a light on the present time of the narrative. Although attention is most often drawn to the violence of the lynching party, the parallelism with “A Rose for Emily” encourages the reader to pay as much attention to the story of the woman whose probably imaginary rape but real loneliness sets off the violent outcome. The first explicit reference to the movies comes in the early description of one of the white men discussing the rumor at the barber-shop: “In his frothy beard he looked like a desert rat in the moving pictures” (170). In section 4, Minnie, certainly nervous either because she realizes that her offhand allegations of harassment by the black man led to his murder or because she is too distracted to weigh it, has to come out in the streets of the town where everybody is going to watch her. She cannot repress her nervous laughter until she reaches a place that is public but that provides a background against which reality can be simplified—Faulkner’s metaphor is that in this theater the world becomes thankfully two-dimensional:

They reached the picture show. It was like a miniature fairyland with its lighted lobby and colored lithographs of life caught in its terrible and beautiful mutations. Her lips began to tingle. In the dark, when the picture began, it would be all right; she could hold back the laughing so it would not waste away so fast and so soon. So she hurried on before the turning faces, the undertones of low astonishment, and they took their accustomed places where she could see the aisle against the silver glare and the young men and girls coming in two and two against it. (181)

13 The position of the moviegoer, a gaping spectator hidden in the dark, is similar to that of the observer concealing himself behind an obstacle, an observer recurrent in Faulkner, and not just in the short stories. The initial scene of the novel *Sanctuary*, with the bootlegger Popeye (note the suggestive name) hidden behind a bush and watching someone drink at the spring, is one of the most famous instances, and this is a novel whose writing was more or less simultaneous with that of "Dry September". This "sanctuary" proves terribly insecure.

14 In "Dry September" obviously what Faulkner shows his protagonist to be sensitive to is the power of the "silver screen" to create a displacement into another world—all the more so, no doubt, when the films were silent and in black and white. On the background of the screen, or more precisely as figures on the ground that constitutes the screen, the couples become impersonal double figures. This is how the text continues:

The lights flicked away; the screen glowed silver, and soon life began to unfold, beautiful and passionate and sad, while still the young men and girls entered, scented and sibilant in the half dark, their paired backs in silhouette delicate and sleek, their slim, quick bodies awkward, divinely young, while beyond them the silver dream accumulated, inevitably on and on. She began to laugh. In trying to suppress it, it made more noise than ever; heads began to turn. Still laughing, her friends raised her and led her out, and she stood at the curb, laughing on a high, sustained note, until the taxi came up and they helped her in. (181)

15 Minnie watches two celluloid-made dreams: the world of life in all its dreamlike intensity in the movie, and the de-realized dream of the young people's love stories. It is interesting to note that in Faulkner's description the celluloid images "accumulate", as if building up to a point of saturation which becomes ultimately as stifling as the palpable dry air of the Southern heat, so that the nervous laughter starts again and Minnie has to expose herself again to the gazes she had been trying to escape in the dark of the theatre.

16 The last section of the story is very short, a kind of epilogue: it is set in the house of McLendon, the leader of the lynching party, on his return home. Another woman is here, his wife of course, and she is shown reading a magazine, as if to create a kind of *dissolve* between the unaccountable violence of the lynching and the middle-class comfort of this contemporary Southern home, as cozy as a bird-cage, the author notes:

IT WAS MIDNIGHT when McLendon drove up to his neat new house. It was trim and fresh as a birdcage and almost as small, with its clean, green-and-white paint. He locked the car and mounted the porch and entered. His wife rose from a chair beside the reading lamp. McLendon stopped in the floor and stared at her until she looked down.

"Look at that clock," he said, lifting his arm, pointing. She stood before him her face lowered, a magazine in her hands. Her face was pale, strained, and weary-looking. "Haven't I told you about sitting up like this, waiting to see when I come in?" (182)

17 The dissolve actually leads on to the contemporary stage of violence in the nation: the short story, in its original context of publication (interestingly a magazine, the kind of

medium McLendon's wife is reading) is published side by side with an essay on the brutal methods of police and justice in the 1920s' South<sup>4</sup>. Between section 4—Minnie at the movie-theater—and section 5—Mrs McLendon reading her magazine in her birdcage of a house—a parallel sense of illusory security is conveyed; but the escape from the stifling drought of September into the black and white two-dimensional world of fiction turns into the trap of a violent society. The cinematic *dissolve* technique elaborated in silent movies proves quite efficient to create meaning by counterpoint between juxtaposed textual sequences.

### III. Literary *incipits* as establishing shots

18 My third remark will have to do with another feature of Faulkner's technique of composition: the way he would tend to start from what you could describe as an establishing shot, a visual thematic summary of the tensions the narrative is going to stage.<sup>5</sup> In his stories Faulkner's sense of the grotesque seems to borrow from the silent movies' expressionism. He thinks in terms of striking silent shots, often one figure watching motionless and unseen, like the audience in a movie theater, while the action develops laterally across a static camera's angle of view that reveals a whole relationship in one scene.

19 Let us turn to a less well-known instance of this pattern, an unfinished manuscript fragment of what might have been a short story, but did not develop, until decades later it was eventually turned into Faulkner's three-volume saga, the *Snopes* trilogy<sup>6</sup>:

It can begin here, with Flem himself sitting in a new Mission oak chair, behind the new plate glass window of his recently remodeled bank, while his opaque expressionless gaze contemplates with complete inscrutability the buxom and still disturbing image of his silk clad wife apparently passing the casual time of day with Colonel Hoxey in front of the post office.<sup>7</sup>

20 It is interesting that in this working note, Faulkner's idea for a story comes in the form of stage directions toward an establishing shot which would combine all the key elements for the character and the plot: the Balzacian pattern of the redneck son turned *nouveau-riche* who traded his attractive wife for a position in the bank. The next version of this snapshot was in *Father Abraham*, Faulkner's earliest draft of the novel that was eventually to run into a three-novel trilogy, but for the moment ran to a long short that Faulkner laid aside for more than ten years before resuming it as a set of novels. In this version, the scene was extravagantly contextualized, with mock-heroic comparisons of the character to religious, political or mythic figures preceding the "establishing shot" of sorts—but overloaded with ideas and abstractions:

He is a living example of the astonishing byblows of man's utopian dreams actually functioning; in this case the dream is Democracy. He will become legendary in time, but he has always been symbolic. Legendary as Roland and as symbolic of a form of behavior; as symbolic of an age and a region as his predecessor, a portly man with a white imperial and a shoestring tie and a two gallon hat, was; as symbolic and as typical of a frame of mind as Buddha is today. With this difference: Buddha contemplates an abstraction and derives a secret amusement of it; while he behind the new plate glass window of his recently remodelled bank, dwells with neither lust nor alarm on the plump yet disturbing image of his silkclad wife passing the time of day with Colonel Winword in front of the postoffice.<sup>8</sup>

21 This heavy-handed commentary to contextualize the central character would seem to remind one of the style of Balzac, who was a deep influence on early Faulkner. But

again, this is from a draft: in actual realization, Faulkner relied more economically on an expressionist tableau to reveal the tensions between the characters that were at the heart of the plot. The snapshot of Miss Emily in "A Rose for Emily," one of Faulkner's first mature short stories, is a much more visual establishing shot, deriving its power from its gothic expressionism as the silent movie inherited it from the whole romantic tradition of narrative painting:

We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front-door.  
(CS 123)

- 22 Faulkner's modernist techniques thus blend the legacy of his most innovative literary forerunners with the intensifying factor that inspiration from the budding cinematographic techniques of the silent movie provided him with.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butler, Robert Olen. *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*, ed. Janet Burroway. New York: Grove, 2005.

Faulkner, William. "A Rose for Emily" (1930); "Dry September" (1931); "Golden Land" (1935); in William Faulkner, *Collected Stories*. New York: Random, 1950.

----. *Father Abraham*, ed. James B. Meriwether. New York: Random, 1983.

Liénard-Yeterian, Marie. *Faulkner et le cinéma*. Michel Houdiard, 2010.

Melville, Herman. *The Piazza Tales* (1956). Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1998.

## NOTES

1. The most extensive recent study of these aspects of Faulkner's career is Marie Liénard-Yeterian's recent book, *Faulkner et le cinéma*.
2. <[http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~ehrlch/361/melville\\_letters.html](http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~ehrlch/361/melville_letters.html)>
3. Unfortunately in the case of Melville's stories this opportunity is rarely presented to the reader. Popular selections of Melville's stories rarely consider that the order Melville suggested might be relevant. Only the Northwestern-Newberry authoritative edition restores the arrangement of the original *Piazza Tales* collection.
4. "Dry September" first appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* 85 (January 1931), 49-56. The next item in the periodical was an essay by Dudley Cammett Lunt entitled "The American Inquisition," that started with this chillingly suggestive paragraph: "A flash of lighting revealed their destination to the Negro. He glimpsed a mass of swaying trees with their branches lashing and relashing against the massed clouds. Beneath stood row upon row of white stones, wet and gleaming in the darkness. It was the cemetery." The article exposed that torture and intimidation were more and more often interfering with due process of justice in the nation.

5. An establishing shot can sometimes be considered as the equivalent of novelistic contextualization. I am considering it here in a slightly different manner.
  6. *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), *The Mansion* (1959).
  7. Faulkner collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, #9817, Box 1, item 5, "description of Flem Snopes sitting in the window of his bank."
  8. William Faulkner, *Father Abraham*, 13.
- 

## ABSTRACTS

Trois remarques sur le cousinage entre cinéma et nouvelle moderniste: le parallélisme entre la construction des recueils de nouvelle depuis Melville et le montage cinématographique, la trace du cinéma muet dans les nouvelles les plus anciennes de Faulkner, le parallélisme entre sa méthode de composition et la technique du plan de situation développée par le cinéma.

## AUTHORS

### JACQUES POTHIER

Jacques Pothier teaches American literature at the Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin en Yvelines, where he is a member of the Centre d'Histoire Culturelle des Sociétés Contemporaines and the dean of the Institute for Languages and International Studies. He is the vice-president of the Institut des Amériques (France) for North America. He has published two books, *William Faulkner: essayer de tout dire* (Paris: Belin, 2003) and *Les nouvelles de Flannery O'Connor* (Nantes, France: Le Temps, 2004). His fields of research cover the literature of the South, the theme of space, the epistemology of American Studies, the role of literature in the construction of local or national identities and as privileged field for cultural transfer. He is involved in the edition of the works of William Faulkner in la Pléiade, Gallimard.