

1966

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Recommended Citation

Webb, James W. (1966) "Faulkner writes A Fable," *Studies in English*: Vol. 7 , Article 4.
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol7/iss1/4

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FAULKNER WRITES A FABLE

by James W. Webb

Although William Faulkner, in writing *A Fable*, did not glorify war and did not suggest that it is the best means that man has at his disposal for settling quarrels, yet he was attracted by war and he involved himself by his own personal experience and by his fiction. War as he envisioned it is the concentration and summation of evil and man's struggle in the world.

Faulkner was too slight in stature for duty with the armed services during World War I. Nevertheless, he made his way to Canada and joined the R.A.F. but the war was over before his squadron, which was in training at Deseronto Field, Canada, was ready for action. Upon being demobilized, he was made an honorary lieutenant,¹ and in 1919, he returned to Oxford, Mississippi, wearing his uniform. Stories which eventually became legends began to circulate locally in and around Oxford, Mississippi, in connection with his duty with the R.A.F. There is a rather detailed, embroidered account of his diving a Spad, a French biplane of World War I, into a hanger, landing upside down in the roof; and that while he was suspended from the cockpit, someone handed him a bottle of whiskey.² Also, there is the account of a silver plate in his head. There are also accounts of his dogfights with German pilots. When individuals asked him to confirm these stories, he would smile, give a knowing look and even on occasion give the tall tale a word or nod of approval, as for example, explaining the difficulty of forcing the beverage to go up hill from mouth to stomach while he was suspended from the cockpit of his plane there in the roof of the hangar. They were good stories, too, and listeners were impressed.

¹A. Wigfall Green, "William Faulkner's Flight Training in Canada," *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, VI (1965), 59.

²*Ibid.*, p. 53. The writer of this article has lived in the Oxford, Mississippi community since 1947 and has heard these stories from various persons.

Faulkner often protested that he was not a writer, but just a story teller and a farmer. He found pleasure in listening to good stories whether they were told around a camp fire or at a social gathering. Regarding ideas and the techniques employed, he said little or nothing about them to the merely curious or to the reporter who posed the question and then waited with pad and pencil in hand. Story telling, however, came naturally to him. Even as a child he told stories, and when his daughter Jill was a child he told stories in extemporized fashion to the children of the neighborhood. He wrote anywhere and at any time the spirit moved him, using a portable typewriter on a park bench located on the Mississippi gulf coast, in his office, in Hollywood, or at Random House in New York. While out working about the grounds during the day and pondering, he would cease all other activity and go into his office to work. In the middle of the night he might get up, put on his bathrobe, go downstairs to the office to write off the top of his mind for an hour or two. On one warm summer afternoon in August, 1965, while Mrs. Faulkner sat on the east porch of Rowan Oak reminiscing of the past, she recounted to this writer that her husband would get up in the middle of the night and go downstairs to write. She recalled that one night when he was going down the stairs, he tripped and fell. "Made the awfulest racket you ever heard," she said. "I went to see about him. He was standing there at the foot of the stairs straightening his bathrobe. Evidently, he was not hurt. He went on to the office and wrote out what he had on his mind and returned to bed some time later."

On one occasion Faulkner commented:

I have myself, one simple rule, which is to write only when it is hot, and always stop before it cools off so I will save something to go back to, never to write myself out. But there is somewhere, whether you realize it or not, there is the policeman that insists on some order, some unity in the work. But I would say never force yourself to write anything You must be an amateur writer always. You must do it because it's fun,

just like you play a hard set of tennis because it's fun, not for profit—because it's your cup of tea.³

Early in November, 1944, Faulkner wrote to Malcolm Cowley saying:

As regards any specific book, I'm trying primarily to tell a story, in the most effective way I can think of, the most moving, the most exhaustive. But I think even that is incidental to what I am trying to do, taking my output (the course of it) as a whole. I am telling the same story over and over, which is myself and the world. Tom Wolfe was trying to say everything, the world plus "I" or filtered through "I" or the of "I" to embrace the world in which he was born and walked a little while and then lay down again, into one volume. I am trying to go a step further. This I think accounts for what people call the obscurity, the involved formless "style", endless sentences. I'm trying to say it all in one sentence, between one Cap and one period. I'm still trying to put it all, if possible, on one pinhead.⁴

William Faulkner, however, must be taken seriously. As one of the foremost writers of this century, he contemplated man's problems, and he expressed his views on developments and events of his time whether of local or international import—from his concern with people slipping into his beloved Bailey's woods behind his house to shoot his "pet" squirrels, with irregularities in the social order within his state, or with dictatorship of any form. He was an avid reader and he went back often to dip into his favorite literary masterpieces. He took full advantage of his position in receiving the Nobel award in 1950, and while standing on this pinnacle for distinguished figures he made pronouncements that scholars have since reckoned with more seriously in reappraising his work. Man's

³Joseph L. Fant and Robert Ashley, eds. *Faulkner at West Point* (New York: Random House, c. 1964), p. 99.

⁴Malcolm Cowley, "The Solitude of William Faulkner," *The Atlantic* (June, 1966), 101.

conflict with himself, his endurance, his compassion in the face of greed, and his immortality clearly stated in his famous Nobel Prize acceptance speech now became clearer on one's rereading of early writings. These matters are quite apparent in his post-Stockholm writings.

A Fable is William Faulkner's greatest effort to place himself in the company of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Melville, and Tolstoy. He was ambitious to produce a great work of epic proportions. At the time of publication his publisher predicted that *A Fable* "will be recognized as a classic during the lifetime of its author."⁵ Faulkner's desire was to write of man's problem on a grand scale for now and for all time—a great effort to reach a great and ambitious goal, even at the risk of its falling short of the mark that made the writer great. This is Faulkner's reason for his high regard for Thomas Wolfe.⁶ Faulkner's most ambitious work, *A Fable*, was a "tour de force." He spent at least nine years pondering and writing it. In answer to a question on one occasion he stated that

. . . The notion occurred to me one day in 1942 shortly after Pearl Harbor and the beginning of the last great war. Suppose—who might that unknown soldier be? Suppose that had been Christ again under that fine big cenotaph with the eternal flame burning on it? That he would be crucified again, and I had to—then it became *tour de force*, because I had to invent enough stuff to carry the notion.

Q. You were writing from an idea then?

A. That's right, that was an idea and a hope, an unexpressed thought that Christ had appeared twice, he had been crucified twice, and maybe we'd have only one more chance . . .⁷

⁵From the jacket of *A Fable* (New York: Random House, 1950, 1954).

⁶Green, "First Lectures at a University from notes of Richard M. Allen," *William Faulkner of Oxford*, edited by James W. Webb and A. Wigfall Green (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, c. 1965), p. 135.

⁷Frederick L. Gwyn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University-Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 27.

In 1942, Faulkner was forty-five years of age. His two living brothers were able to go into the military service during World War II, but he had to content himself at Oxford with civil defense work and writing. One can speculate here and visualize Faulkner the writer preoccupied as he passed his friends on the square, pre-occupied with a war story and the Christ theme.

Faulkner set the scene of what he thought to be his greatest work, *A Fable*, in France, in and around the battlefields of Verdun, 1918. For his theme, he, like Milton, wished to present man's dilemma on a world wide, historical, and mythical basis. The story of the French corporal in the story echoes at many points the story of Christ during the Passion Week. The battle of Verdun, in the background of the story, was perhaps the greatest and one of the longest and bloodiest battles of history. Verdun had for some fifteen hundred years guarded the crossing of the Meuse River. Here along the river and on the heights were natural sites for a series of forts—Douaumont, Vaux, and others. One has only to read history to be reminded of the mighty and persistent onslaught of the Germans at Verdun to be convinced of the heroism and endurance of French soldiers despite the fact that on other occasions their morale had reached a low ebb and that French generals had to cope with mutinies and even with a false armistice—as did the Germans. In *A Fable*, and in other writings, Faulkner emphasizes the old verity that to endure is to prevail. A fusing of the Christ story and Verdun served his purpose. With a little imagination one can see here a setting for an Armageddon. Faulkner read his Bible and he evidently read accounts of Verdun. Some fifteen miles to the south was St. Mihiel. Between Verdun and Paris was Chalons-sur-Marne. Faulkner was in no sense writing a documentary. As he would profess, he was writing a story. Verdun was a great event, and this is no doubt the reason that Faulkner made use of it. He coins names, and, in his imagination, rearranges history for his own purpose. In the midst of great activity of vast numbers of men and machines of war he writes his story of the activities of the generalissimo, the runner, and the corporal, each with his own problem, his own role, within the larger context of a battle of huge proportions. Much of the account possesses the qualities of a bad dream. The three chief characters—the generalissimo (the prime

mover of events—God and Satan, good and evil) the corporal (the Christ figure), and the runner (man)—are products of the writer's imagination—all three designed for symbolic or allegorical purposes. The dilemma, the action, and the agony in this setting of blasted rubble of earth and fortifications, even the blasted homes of villagers, are almost more than a reader can contemplate. It will be remembered that World War I took a toll of approximately 8,000,000 lives, and a large portion of them were taken at Verdun. The fighting that raged around this fortress city lasted some 500 days, and more than 400,000 Frenchmen and 300,000 Germans died here.

From April 15-29, 1951, Faulkner made a journey to France for the express purpose of making an on-the-spot inspection of World War I battlefields of the Western Front, specifically Verdun and Soissons. In a letter, he states that he went to France "to examine the French battle lines of 1914-1918 and to talk to people, old soldiers, government officials, etc. to gain material for a book set in the 1918 war which I have been working on for some time, and had to get definite geographical information, atmosphere, etc. to go on with it."⁸

Upon his return to Oxford, Mississippi, Faulkner resumed his work, pecking out words and sometimes almost endless sentences on a portable typewriter located on a small table in front of the west window of his study—his "office"—Rowan Oak. In one corner of the room is a small homemade fold-top desk containing pencils, a bottle of liniment, some drafting tools, a pocket edition of the New Testament, a chocolate mint, and various other items—all as he left them some four years ago. All of the furnishings, are still completely intact, including the small wooden bed for his rest periods. *A Fable*, in large part, was written in this room.

Perhaps, there has been too much speculation regarding this quiet mannered man and his writing habits already. However, a few tangible evidences, although scarce and elusive, may give a clue to his approach to *A Fable*. The work as conceived in his mind

⁸Letter dated July 2, 1952. Also, on March 23, 1962, this writer heard Faulkner in conversation at his home, Rowan Oak, discuss his trip to France.

was obviously of tremendous proportions. The *tour de force* had to be written. He reduced the story as it was conceived in his mind to an outline which he wrote on the walls of his office, beginning each division of the outline some six feet from the floor. Beginning on the north wall with the chief events on "Monday," he continued across the east wall through "Sunday," to the door of the room. Then to the right of the door on the remaining wall space, he outlined the events of "Tomorrow." The outline is written in his characteristically neat but difficult-to-read handwriting on the white plastered wall. Later, he carefully covered the writing with shellac for the sake of permanency. The outline as it was copied without editing for this paper is as follows:

MONDAY

II 06:00 The French Regiment mutinies, refuses to leave the trench to make an attack, is drawn out, disarmed, put under arrest & sent to the rear.

II The General commanding the division containing the Regiment goes to his Army Group Commander and officially requests permission to have the whole Regiment executed. The Group Commander tells the Division Commander he is ordered to Chaulnesmont Wednesday.

~~XI 24:00 The British battalion runner tells the sentry about the lorries carrying blank A A shells up to the front at Villeneuve l'Abbaye. The sentry assaults the runner. Both are put under arrest. The runner's history included.~~

12:00 The French front enters armistice with the German one opposite it.

15:00 The British and American fronts enter armistice with the German ones opposite them.

TUESDAY

V The people from the district where the Regiment was raised, parents and kin of the men in it, begin to gather at Chaulnesmont.

II 02:00 The Division Commander returns unofficially to the Group Commander, who tells him that he is expected by the Allied Commander-in-Chief at Chaulnesmont Wednesday Afternoon.

~~✗ The Sentry and the Runner are under arrest with unarmed guards [not readable] the British lines.~~

III 24:00 The British battalion Runner tells the Sentry about the lorries carrying blank A A shells up to the front at Villeneuve l'Abbaye. The Sentry assaults the Runner. Both are put under arrest. The Runner's history included.

WEDNESDAY

VI The Regiment is brought to Chaulnesmont under arrest and put inside the prison compound. Magdalen is in the crowd waiting for its arrival. Introduces the Corporal and his squad and the three Generals.

IV The German General is flown across the lines at Villeneuve l'Abbaye, shot at with blank archie and pursued by three British aeroplanes firing blank ammunition. Levine's story included.

V The Division Commander is brought to Chaulnesmont, under arrest.

VII Mary and Martha reach Chaulnesmont and are met by Magdalen. They are repulsed by the people in the city because of their relationship to the Corporal, whom the people hold responsible for the Regiment's mutiny and hence its present jeopardy.

VI 17:00 The Runner finds himself free of arrest, escapes to the rear and sees the German aeroplane, surrounded by fake anti-aircraft fire and pursued by the three British aeroplanes firing blank ammunition, land on the aerodrome at Villeneuve l'Abbaye. Includes the story of the Runner, the Sentry, the old Negro preacher and his grandson and the stolen race horse.

VII The Prisoners in the compound.

- VII The Division Commander is put under arrest by the old general.
- VII The Old General and witnesses examine the Corporal.
- VII The Old General's interview with Mary, Martha and Magdalen. Martha's story.
- VII The 3 Generals and the German General.
- VII The story of the Old General and the Quarter Master General.
- VII The Old General sends his aide to report the miracle of the Spoon.

THURSDAY

- VIII The Runner goes to Paris to enlist the aid of the old Negro preacher. They return to the battalion, and persuade it to make the unarmed advance into no man's Land, where an unarmed German force meets it, and both, except for the Runner, are destroyed by simultaneous British & German barrages. ~~(Includes the story of the Sentry, the old Negro preacher and the stolen race horse.)~~
- VIII Levine hears about the unarmed British and German forces destroyed deliberately by their own barrages, and commits suicide.
- VIII The French Division Commander is executed by the three American privates.
- VIII The Last Supper of the Corporal and his squad.
- VIII The Old General offers the Corporal the Three Temptations. ~~The Corporal~~ to save himself the Corporal refuses them.
- VIII The French chaplain is sent to the Corporal to persuade the Corporal to accept Christianity & so repudiate his stand. The Priest fails, commits suicide.

FRIDAY

- IX The Corporal is executed between the two lesser criminals. Martha, Mary and Magdalen obtain his body, and the medal, from the Sergeant Major and carry it away for burial.

SATURDAY

Mary, Martha and Madgalen bury the Corporal's body in a field on Martha's husband's farm, which was between the battle lines but which will be safe now that they believe the war is over.

SUNDAY

The War starts again. A victorious Allied barrage and attack passes over the site of the Corporal's grave. When Martha, Mary and Magdalen return to the grave, the body has vanished.

TOMORROW

- X A French sergeant and twelve men are sent by the French government to Verdun to get the unidentifiable body of a soldier from the catacombs under Fort de Vallaumont. They get the body, swap it at the Verdun station for more drink to a woman who identifies it as her son, awake sober at St. Mihiel, realize their predicament, buy another body from a local farmer who found it in his field, and take the new body to Paris.
- X The British battalion Runner, accompanied by Judas in his desperate desire to buy release from his misery, reach the farm of Martha and Mary. The Runner is given the Corporal's medal, and departs. Judas goes out to hang himself.
- X The body of the old Generalissimo is brought in state to the Arc de Triumphe for a final ceremony. The Runner bursts out of the crowd, interrupts the ceremony by flinging the corporal's medal at the casket.⁹

In the process of writing the outline, Faulkner saw fit to cross out portions, and in some instances, transferred them to other parts

⁹This outline was copied from the wall of Faulkner's office by permission. The writer of this article expended much effort and care in copying the outline accurately. Capitalization, punctuation, numbering, and other details are retained here as they appear on the wall. Note crossed out portions. In particular, note that crossed out portion No. III under "Monday" was moved to No. VI under "Tuesday."



Photo by Edwin Meek

FAULKNER'S OUTLINE OF A FABLE

of the outline, for example, from "Monday" to "Tuesday." Whether he simply got ahead of himself and discovered it in the process or whether he decided to revise, who knows?

The reader will note, also, that the outline begins with events on Monday and that the finished work, *A Fable*, begins with the events of Wednesday. This arrangement gave the author opportunity to begin in the middle of the action—*in medias res*—and to bring in the earlier events by means of flashback, by conversations of characters, and by interior dialogue. The order of events as narrated in the published work as indicated by chapter headings is as follows: Wednesday; Monday and Monday Night; Tuesday Night; Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; Tuesday and Wednesday; Tuesday, Wednesday, and Wednesday Night; Wednesday Night; Thursday and Thursday Night; Friday, Saturday, and Sunday; and Tomorrow. Here, it seems, is one of the chief values of the preserved outline for those who study Faulkner's method of composition—an indication of how he went about the process of planning and revising his work.

The rough draft of *A Fable* consumed countless hours—more than nine years—and some 2,000 pages in length.¹⁰ Bennett Cerf provided an office at Random House and Faulkner went to New York to condense the work to book size. In his dedication and in giving credit, Faulkner stated that the book actually took form in December 1944, during the dying days of the Axis Powers in World War II.¹¹ To William Bacher and Henry Hathaway of Beverly Hills, California, the author gives credit "for the basic idea from which the book grew into its present form."¹² The work was completed in November, 1953. The opening statement on the jacket begins with the declaration that here is "The crowning achievement of William Faulkner's distinguished and honored career."¹³ The trip to France for the purpose of surveying World War I battlefields, the carefully preserved outline on his office walls, the 2,000 pages of rough draft, and the many hours spent in the writing clearly

¹⁰*Newsweek*, XLIV (August 2, 1954), 49.

¹¹From the jacket of *A Fable*.

¹²*A Fable*, Dedication.

¹³From the jacket of *A Fable*.

indicate Faulkner's serious purpose and high hopes for the completed task. He appropriately enough gave the work the title, *A Fable*. The publisher predicts in his statement on the jacket of the book:

That many controversial interpretations will be read into *A Fable* is inevitable. Countless symbolic meanings will be attributed to the central characters and events in this stirring novel. Whether they refer to the figures suggestive of godliness or caesarism, Mary, Martha, Magdalene, the thieves or the embodiment of the trinity of man's conscience in the persons of the young aviator, the old Quartermaster General and the dedicated soldier from the ranks, the impact of these human beings, as men and women and as symbols, upon believer and skeptic must be profoundly moving.

To write of the reception of *A Fable* by reviewers, critics, and other readers is going beyond the intent of this article, but it may be of interest to state that the work has baffled some who have read or have attempted to read it.¹⁴ Immediately after the work was published, a few reviewers, with limited time as a factor, made maximum use of the publisher's information on the jacket. The author was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for it. Some of the world's best literary minds have since been challenged by it and have made the allegory clearer to readers and have pointed out its profundities.¹⁵ Character identities within the context of the New Testament and the Passion Week have been studied.¹⁶ It will never serve as light bedside reading, but scholars of Faulkner's work and those who are concerned with man's struggle with the human heart will be drawn to it.

¹⁴*Newsweek*, XLIV (August 2, 1954), 48-50.

¹⁵For example, see Professor Heinrich Straumann's "An American Interpretation of Existence: Faulkner's *A Fable*," *William Faulkner-Three Decades of Criticism* (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 349-372.

¹⁶William Thornton Magruder, "Character Identities in William Faulkner's *A Fable*." Unpublished master's thesis, University of Mississippi, 1963.