

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Tuesday, February 1, 2011

Location: Loganberry Books, 13015 Larchmere
Hosts: Steven Fox and Jane Hammond
Novel: *The Sound and the Fury*, by William Faulkner
Papers: Biographical: Ted Sande
Critical: Leon Gabinet

Opening: Under yet another Winter Storm Warning, 26 members and guests of The Novel Club of Cleveland gathered at Loganberry Books. Committee reports were summarized by the President, and minutes from last month's meeting were presented.

Ted Sande presented the biographical paper.

William Faulkner (1898-1962) generally set his stories in early-twentieth-century Mississippi. His fictional Yoknapatawpha County is based on the area around Oxford, Mississippi, where Faulkner grew up from the age of four. His work is permeated by the Civil War and Reconstruction-era heritage of the area. Faulkner was a lackluster student who never completed high school but eventually spent three semesters as a student at Ole Miss on the strength of his WWI military service which consisted of flight training (but no combat) in the Canadian Air Force. Later he was a discontented and unsuccessful postmaster at Ole Miss.

Faulkner began writing in the 1920s, and made contacts with various other rising authors. He traveled to Paris and then back, and married his childhood sweetheart (after she had first married a more promising suitor and been divorced). When he began to make money with his writings, he bought a plantation named Roanoke, which was his headquarters for the rest of his life. He also spent some time writing Hollywood filmscripts.

In the 1950s, Faulkner became a "sometime emissary" of the U.S. government during the Cold War; he also did some stints teaching writing at various universities. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949. He received other important awards—Pulitzers, National Book Awards, and others. Faulkner gave part of his Nobel Prize award to set up the Penn Faulkner award for new authors, and also made other charitable contributions. His total output—comprising 19 novels, 125 short stories, 7 books of poetry, 2 plays,

and many filmscripts—depicts a “wounded society” in the South, “beyond optimism and barren of hope.” But it is a world anchored in family tradition and its own peculiar sense of morality. Faulkner’s work dealt with questions all people struggle with. He strove to “leave something behind him which lives,” which can be seen as an artist’s way of writing “Kilroy was here” on the wall.

Leon Cabinet presented the critical paper.

This novel’s title, drawn from the famous speech in Act V of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, sets up a very highly regarded and much-analyzed, much-criticized novel. The novel’s four sections are distinct in presentation. **Chapter I**, “Benjy’s chapter,” is the “tale told by an idiot,” slipping through time in complex way. Since Benjy has no moral point of view, perhaps his chapter is the most objective. Various elements of the chapter show the disintegration of the aristocratic values and virtues of the Old South. Benjy perceives and mourns the loss of virtue (represented by Caddy’s decline), but is powerless to do anything about it.

In **Chapter II**, “Quentin’s chapter,” time flashes back to the day of Quentin’s suicide in 1910—an earlier phase of family history. Quentin is a sensitive soul, tormented by the family’s decline. Time is his enemy because it might lead to the loss of his certainty of his Southern values; he chooses death as an attempt to escape. The explicit sexual subtext to the relationship between Quentin and Caddy confuses the issues of Southern Gentlemen’s Code.

Chapter III returns to the week of Benjy’s chapter (in April, 1928); it is told in the coherent but nasty, mean, and selfish voice of Jason IV. Jason’s selfishness is shown as beginning in his earliest childhood, as he cheats and steals from everyone, living for the day with no concern for the past or anyone else’s feelings. Jason, the narcissistic sociopath, is now head of the Compson clan.

[N.B., although Caddy doesn’t speak at all, she is the focus of the story via all of her brothers’ focus on her. She hovers above the story, personifying the family and its decline.]

Chapter IV is “Dilsey’s Chapter,” seen mostly over her shoulder though not spoken by her. Dilsey keeps things on an even keel, declaring near the novel’s end that she “seed de beginnin, and now [she] sees de endin” of the Compsons’ story. Dilsey is the only one (except Caddy) who treats Benjy with love. Critics seem to prefer to see Dilsey as personifying old-fashioned virtues of honor,

faith, love, loyalty, family, etc.—which the old Compson family stood for, and which characterize the rebirth of the South (e.g. through Martin Luther King, Jr.)—so, Faulkner was perhaps prescient in this choice and in his Appendix entry for Dilsey, “They endured.”

Notes on group discussion:

1. On the question of the effectiveness and reliability of Benjy as Chapter I narrator:

Readers expressed consensus that Benjy is reliable, the voice of the misery of the human race—not making moral judgments but just presenting things as they are. Movement back and forth through time (via stream-of-consciousness technique) is challenging to the reader, but important to the story’s presentation.

2. On the question of whether Caddy should have a chapter in which she speaks, readers felt that a lot of Caddy’s character comes from the brothers’ views—her tragedy is suggested by her brothers’ reaction to her. Therefore, readers seemed to agree that Caddy is more effective coming through the views of others than she could have been as a first-person presence.

3. Regarding Quentin’s chapter—the meaning of his suicide, the significance of his obsession with Caddy, reasons for time lapse as part of his importance—varying views were expressed:

- Perhaps Quentin’s chapter is the weakest part of the novel—he’s a Hamlet-like character, obsessed with incest, family, etc., just not liking the time he’s been born into.

- Or, perhaps Quentin is strong, though pathetic in his searching for death from one place to another. On this view, the chapter is an extremely powerful presentation of Quentin’s movement toward suicide, and of how vexed he is by so many things that happen during his last day. The expression of his complete inability to go forward, making suicide seem a rationale decision, is well presented—perhaps as a microcosm of the Old South.

4. On the question of whether the novel comments more on the failure of the Old South to modernize, or more on universalities of the human condition, readers generally agreed that the greatness of the novel is in its universality—“the fall of the House of Atreus meets ‘The Fall of the House of Usher.’”

Additional questions were raised by readers: ·Is Dilsey a failed character (an Uncle Tom, unacceptable in her harsh treatment of Luster)? ·How can the dialect features of the novel be effectively translated into other languages? ·Is use of “the n word” distractingly offensive? [To the latter charge, several responded negatively, citing unacceptability of the recent bowdlerized version of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as support by analogy.]

As the meeting approached a somewhat early close (because of the continuing harsh weather and the bookstore’s interest in a timely closing), Nick Ogan expressed the opinion that this novel is a great work of art, “beyond analysis,” and asked for a show of hands from others who agreed—to which there was widespread positive response.