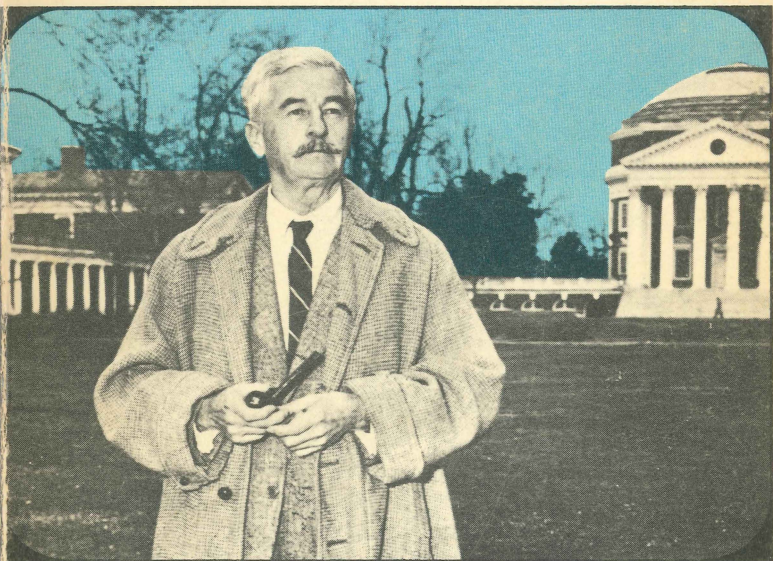


Faulkner

in the University



CLASS CONFERENCES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
1957-1958

Edited by **FREDERICK L. GWYNN**
and **JOSEPH L. BLOTNER**

A VINTAGE BOOK

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1957—1958 ☞ EDITED BY

FREDERICK L. GWYNN AND

JOSEPH L. BLOTNER

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Preface

From February to June of 1957 and 1958, William Faulkner was Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia under a grant from the Emily Clark Balch Fund for American Literature. As Mr. Faulkner himself expressed it, the grant furnished him with a house to live in and someone to clean it, making his association with the University not that of a professor but rather "the mutually voluntary one of a guest accepting and returning the amenities of guesthood."

During these periods—except for short trips to Greece, to Princeton, and to Mississippi—Mr. Faulkner held thirty-seven group conferences and an uncounted number of individual office meetings with students and staff of the University. He encouraged groups to ask questions about his writing and indeed about anything, which resulted in his answering publicly over two thousand queries on everything from spelling to the nature of man. Almost every word spoken in the group conferences was recorded on tape, now deposited in the Alderman Library of the University. Because a complete transcript of this 40,000-foot record would have been prohibitively long, repetitive, and occasionally misleading, we have selected what seemed to us the most typical and significant questions and answers, indicating omissions by the ellipsis.

We first arranged the material by subject-matter for the convenience of readers, but we later agreed that the order most faithful to the fact and spirit of the sessions would be that in which the questions were actually asked and answered, and that an index would have to serve to link together comments on the same works and subjects. We have reproduced what Mr. Faulkner and his questioners said as accurately as possible, although the absence of studio recording conditions,

PREFACE

the obscuring of parts of questions and answers by laughter or run-out tape, and the presence of natural human error in speaking and hearing have made a perfect transcription impossible. (After hiring persons to transcribe and check, we did the whole job over, and must therefore be held responsible for any imperfections.) We have restricted copy-editing chiefly to punctuation that attempts both to make meaning clear and to reproduce actual pauses in speech. We have consistently omitted the "Yes sir" and "Yes ma'am" with which Mr. Faulkner usually recognized each of his questioners, and we have not attempted to render his striking regional dialect or individualized pronunciation, although it will linger long in our ears. We have of course omitted the author's preliminary readings from his works, as well as the many introductions, conclusions, and classroom rituals by teachers and officials.

Any reader familiar with Faulkner's work will find that many of his answers illuminate an understanding of particular novels and stories, while the total dialogue of course demonstrates the working of the writer's mind and the qualities of his character. On the other hand, a reader would be ill advised to treat these answers as consistently revealed truth. In Mr. Faulkner's own words, "Since his association with the University—and in fact with literature itself during this period—was not professorially appointive but instead was voluntary and invitational, the following is not the (at the moment of speaking) definite record of the ideas and opinions of a writer on life and literature, including his own work, but is rather the self-portrait of a man in motion who also happens to be a writer." No one man's view of an artist's work, least of all the writer's own, can comprehend all views. Furthermore, the writer's memory of words and purposes conceived many years ago must of simple human frailty be faulty and probably at times downright untrue, although Mr. Faulkner always made an effort to recall exactly the facts of his fiction and its design, and even took the trouble (in 1958) to re-read *Absalom, Absalom!* for this purpose. Then too, an artist who creates new life cannot always account for the process even if he wants to, and there are some secrets of creation that he is

entitled to keep forever his own. Finally, any human being speaking in public finds himself unconsciously adapting his remarks to the comparative tone and intelligence of the questioners, the sequence of questions, the questions themselves and how many times he has previously been asked them, the weather, and the condition of his digestion. Mr. Faulkner's answers, in short, must be taken as a revelation of an artist's mind at a particular moment, in a particular place, operating as honestly and painstakingly as it can, to fulfill a particular purpose: "That these"—Mr. Faulkner again—"are questions answered without rehearsal or preparation, by a man old enough in the craft of the human heart to have learned that there are no definitive answers to anything, yet still young enough in spirit to believe that truth may still be found provided one seeks enough, tests and discards, and still tries again." At Mr. Faulkner's suggestion and in his phrasing, we warn the reader that any resemblance the ideas and opinions expressed here have to ideas and opinions Mr. Faulkner has held or expressed previously, and to the ideas and opinions which—since he intends to continue to live and to test and discard for some time yet—he might hold or express in the future, is purely coincidental. Having made this admonition at length, we sum it up by simply urging readers to take the writer's comments for what they are worth.

The interested reader will note that the brief Session Three is recreated from our memory after a recording failure, but he should also know that another failure accounts for the omission of what would have been Session Thirty-Six (19 May 1958, First-Year English, on *As I Lay Dying*) and that the loss of one tape has prevented a final re-check of Session Fourteen. A version of Session Fifteen was printed in *The University of Virginia Magazine* for Winter 1958 and Spring 1958, and the address "A Word to Virginians" appeared in the Spring 1958 issue. A version of Session Eight was printed in *College English* for October 1957. The address "A Word to Young Writers" that begins Session Twenty-Seven appears here for the first time.

For funds to make the whole project possible, we are grate-

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ful to the University of Virginia's Research Committee, Professor C. Julian Bishko, Chairman; to the administrative officers President Colgate W. Darden, Jr. and Comptroller Vincent Shea; and to the Director of the University of Virginia Press, Mr. Charles E. Moran, Jr. For advice we are grateful to Mr. Faulkner's editor and friend, the late Saxe Commins. We are of course indebted to the dozens of here nameless students, teachers, and visitors who asked the questions that drew the answers. The greatest debt—the one to be repaid only by generations of present and future readers of his work—is finally to William Faulkner, whose special role we have tried to signify in our dedication.

FREDERICK L. GWYNN

JOSEPH L. BLOTNER

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SESSION ONE

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GRADUATE COURSE IN AMERICAN FICTION

... Q. Mr. Faulkner, in *The Sound and the Fury* the first three sections of that book are narrated by one of the four Compson children, and in view of the fact that Caddy figures so prominently, is there any particular reason why you didn't have a section with—giving her views or impressions of what went on?

A. That's a good question. That—the explanation of that whole book is in that. It began with the picture of the little girl's muddy drawers, climbing that tree to look in the parlor window with her brothers that didn't have the courage to climb the tree waiting to see what she saw. And I tried first to tell it with one brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section One. I tried with another brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section Two. I tried the third brother, because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes, I thought. And that failed and I tried myself—the fourth section—to tell what happened, and I still failed.

... Q. Speaking of Caddy, is there any way of getting her back from the clutches of the Nazis, where she ends up in the Appendix?

A. I think that that would be a betrayal of Caddy, that it is best to leave her where she is. If she were resurrected there'd be something a little shabby, a little anti-climactic about it, about this. Her tragedy to me is the best I could do with it—

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unless, as I said, I could start over and write the book again and that can't be.

...
Q. Mr. Faulkner, I am interested in the symbolism in *The Sound and the Fury*, and I wasn't able to figure exactly the significance of the shadow symbol in Quentin. It's referred to over and over again: he steps in the shadow, shadow is before him, the shadow is often after him. Well then, what is the significance of this shadow?

A. That wasn't a deliberate symbolism. I would say that that shadow that stayed on his mind so much was foreknowledge of his own death, that he was—Death is here, shall I step into it, or shall I step away from it a little longer? I won't escape it, but shall I accept it now or shall I put it off until next Friday? I think that if it had any reason that must have been it.

...
Q. Sir, what sort of symbol was the snake? We discussed that in both "The Bear" and in "Red Leaves."

A. Oh, the snake is the old grandfather, the old fallen angel, the unregenerate immortal. The good and shining angel ain't very interesting

Q. Sir, what book would you advise a person to read first of yours?

A. Well, that's not a fair question to ask me because I would like anyone to try the one that I love the best, which is a poor one to start on. If you are asking me to give an objective answer I would say maybe *The Unvanquished*.

Q. Why would you select that one?

A. Because it's easy to read. Compared to the others, I mean

...
Q. Mr. Faulkner, I'd like to ask you about Quentin and his relationship with his father. I think many readers get the impression that Quentin is the way he is to a large extent because of his father's lack of values, or the fact that he doesn't seem to pass down to his son many values that will sustain him. Do you think that Quentin winds up the way

he does primarily because of that, or are we meant to see, would you say, that the action that comes primarily from what he is, abetted by what he gets from his father?

A. The action as portrayed by Quentin was transmitted to him through his father. There was a basic failure before that. The grandfather had been a failed brigadier twice in the Civil War. It was the—the basic failure Quentin inherited through his father, or beyond his father. It was a—something had happened somewhere between the first Compson and Quentin. The first Compson was a bold ruthless man who came into Mississippi as a free forester to grasp where and when he could and wanted to, and established what should have been a princely line, and that princely line decayed.

Q. Sir, how do you feel about your books after they have gone to press? Do you reread them and puzzle over them . . . ?

A. No, I don't because by that time I know the book was not as good as it should have been and so I'm usually busy on another one.

Q. As a general rule, you never re-read?

A. No, that's one book the writer don't have to read any more.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, you speak of writing the one great book but in your own works you keep returning to this fictitious county you've made. You don't consider that a pageant, the whole work, from the Indians through the early settlers—?

A. No, it was not my intention to write a pageant of a county, I simply was using the quickest tool to hand. I was using what I knew best, which was the locale where I was born and had lived most of my life. That was just like the carpenter building the fence—he uses the nearest hammer. Only I didn't realize myself that I was creating a pageantry of a particular part of the earth. That just simplified things to me.

...

Q. In "The Bear," Mr. Faulkner, many readers come across Part Four and find it written in quite a different style than the other parts and the conclusion—well, it gets far ahead in years beyond Part Five. Was there any conscious plan in that?

SESSION ONE

A. Only this: "The Bear" was a part of a novel. That novel was—happened to be composed of more or less complete stories, but it was held together by one family, the Negro and the white phase of the same family, same people. *The Bear* was just a part of that—of a novel.

Q. *Go Down, Moses?*

A. Yes.

Q. So that it was all right for Ike to think ahead . . . to his thirty-fifth year.

A. Yes, that's right, because the rest of the book was a part of his past too. To have taken that story out to print it alone I have always removed that part, which I have done.

Q. Yes, some of the textbooks do that.

A. As a short story, a long short story, it has no part in it, but to me "The Bear" is part of the novel, just as a chapter in the novel.

...

Q. In what period of development did you write that book of poems, *A Green Bough*?

A. That was written at the time when you write poetry, which is seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—when you write poetry just for the pleasure of writing poetry and you don't think of printing it until later. It may be—I've often thought that I wrote the novels because I found I couldn't write the poetry, that maybe I wanted to be a poet, maybe I think of myself as a poet, and I failed at that, I couldn't write poetry, so I did the next best thing.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, in your speech at Stockholm you expressed great faith in mankind . . . not only to endure but prevail Do you think that's the impression the average reader would get after reading *The Sound and the Fury*?

A. I can't answer that because I don't know what the average reader gets from reading the book. I agree that what I tried to say I failed to say, and I never have had time to read reviews so I don't know what impression people might get from the book. But in my opinion, yes, that is what I was talking about in all the books, and I failed to say it. I agree

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with you, I did fail. But that was what I was trying to say—that man will prevail, will endure because he is capable of compassion and honor and pride and endurance.

Q. Sir, Hawthorne seemed to have found trouble in creating good characters, whereas his more or less bad characters stand out as works of art. Do you think that is a problem with all writers, that it's harder to create a good character than an evil one?

A. It's possible that that's inherent in human nature, not so much in the character of writers but in human nature itself, that it's easier to conceive of evil than of good or to make—that evil is easier to make believable, credible, than good.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, when you say man has prevailed do you mean individual man has prevailed or group man?

A. Man as a part of life.

Q. In Quentin, for instance, [he] seemed to have the cards stacked against him . . . it seems to be inherently impossible, and I wondered . . .

A. True, and his mother wasn't much good and he had an idiot brother, and yet in that whole family there was Dilsey that held the whole thing together and would continue to hold the whole thing together for no reward, that the will of man to prevail will even take the nether channel of the black man, black race, before it will relinquish, succumb, be defeated.

Q. Well, sir, you seem to have us believe in . . . the ultimate goodness of man, that he will come through in spite of all. How do you explain the sum of mass brutality, the things we practice on each other, the horrible things that take place in our life, including the lines of religion and our politics?

A. I didn't say in the ultimate goodness of man, I said only that man will prevail and will—and in order to prevail he has got to . . . [try to be good]. As to whether he will stay on the earth long enough to attain ultimate goodness, nobody knows. But he does improve, since the only alternative to progress is death. And we can see the little children don't have to work, a merchant can't sell you poisoned food. They are minor im-

provements but they are improvements. Nobody is hanged for stealing bread any more. People are not put in jail for debt. It's some improvement—it's not a great deal, I grant you, as matched against atomic bombs and things like that. But it's some improvement. Man is improved.

Q. You don't feel that mass manipulation by a fanatic along ideological and political lines will negate all this?

A. No, I don't. That to me is part of the ferment of man's immortality—that these people, the nuts, are necessary too.

Q. Do you think that man will prevail against destroying himself . . . ?

A. I think he will prevail against his own self-destruction, yes.

Q. What about the forces of nature . . . ?

A. Well, unless the earth gets sick and tired of him like an old dog and just scratches him off like the old dog does fleas.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, what do you think is man's most important tool—the mind or the heart . . . ?

A. I don't have much confidence in the mind. I think that here is where the shoe fits, that the mind lets you down sooner or later, but this doesn't.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, I've been very much interested in what it seems to me you did—maybe you didn't—in *The Sound and the Fury*, in the character of Caddy. To me she is a very sympathetic character, perhaps the most sympathetic white woman in the book, and yet we get pictures of her only through someone else's comments and most of these comments are quite [?] and wouldn't lead you to admire her on the surface, and yet I do. Did you mean for us to have this feeling for Caddy, and if so, how did you go about reducing her to the negative picture we get of her?

A. To me she was the beautiful one, she was my heart's darling. That's what I wrote the book about and I used the tools which seemed to me the proper tools to try to tell, try to draw the picture of Caddy.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, we've got a poker player over here, Mr. Jordan, who's holding back on a question I'm dying to hear the answer to.

A. Let's have it.

Q. Well, I was wondering in the short story "Was" why Mr. Hubert does not call Uncle Bud. It seems to me that must be the point of the story, and yet no one could understand why he did not call him.

A. I'll have to look at that page again. I don't remember exactly—

Q. He looks up and sees that Tomey's Turl is dealing the cards.

A. Oh, Tomey's Turl wants to be free, and so Tomey's Turl has dealt the right card to the right one, and Mr. Hubert knows that. As soon as he sees that Tomey's Turl was the one that dealt the cards, he knows that he's beat.

Q. But Tomey's Turl stood to win either way, didn't he? . . .

A. No, he was—I don't remember the story too well, but I don't think so. That Tomey's Turl had a stake in that game, too. As I remember it, Hubert Beauchamp would have taken his brother—no, what are the names? I can't even remember the names.

Q. Buck and Buddy.

A. Yes, Buck would have taken Buddy out of the clutches of Miss—what's her name?

Q. Sophonsiba.

A. —Sophonsiba if he had won. And if that had happened then he would have taken Tomey's Turl back with him away from Tomey's Turl's girl, so if Buck lost, then Miss Sophonsiba would take Tomey's Turl's girl home with her. Tomey's Turl was playing for his sweetheart. Yes, that's what the story was, I think.

. . .

Q. I have another question about "The Bear." In the final scene of "The Bear," Boon is sitting under the tree with the squirrels, doing something with his shotgun. It's not clear to

me whether he is destroying his shotgun or trying to put it back together.

A. It had jammed. He was trying to get a jammed shell out to make it fire, and he didn't want anybody else to shoot the squirrels. He was under the tree where the squirrels couldn't get out of it and he didn't want anybody else to shoot the squirrels until he could get his gun fixed.

...

Q. . . . *The Wild Palms* is so very interesting. I think the other, *Old Man*, is a bit of a struggle.

A. Well, you may be right. As I say, they all failed, and maybe it was a mistake to dovetail two of them together that way, but to me it seemed that it was necessary to counterpoint the story of Harry and Charlotte, which I did with the complete antithesis—a man that had a woman he didn't want and was going into infinite trouble even as far as going to jail to get rid of her.

Q. I have a couple of questions about the early Indian stories, about "Red Leaves." Did Doom in your mind, did he wreck the steamboat and maybe kill this man David Callicoat, whose name he took? Did he have some notion of getting that steamboat eventually which he finally picked up and transported twelve miles inland?

A. No, the steamboat simply got too far up the river and stayed too long and when the water fell in the late summer, it couldn't get out again, and so the owners of it just took the valuable machinery out and left the hulk there and Doom decided that would make a nice addition to his house and so he had his people drag it out of the river and across to the plantation.

Q. Did you ever hear of anyone's really ever doing that?

A. No.

Q. Were these Chickasaws ever known to be cannibals? There's some mention of how human flesh may have tasted between two of them once.

A. No, there's no record, but then it's—who's to say

whether at some time one of them might not have tried what it tasted like? Quite often young boys will try things that they are horrified to remember later just to see what it was like Maybe as children they may have found a dead man and cooked some of him to see what he tasted like. But they were not cannibals as far as I know.

Q. Do they exist just in memory now?

A. There are a few, there's a reservation, a remnant of Choctaws. The others, the Indians in my part of Mississippi have vanished into the two races—either the white race or the Negro race. You see traces of the features in the Negroes and a few of the old names in among white families, old white families.

Q. . . . There were Indians at one time in this area?

A. Oh yes. Yes, all the land records go back to the Indian patents, and our country's not very old, our land records are only a hundred fifty years old. That was frontier then.

Q. Sir, I'm curious about the occasional change in personality that some of your characters undergo between novels. For instance, Narcissa Benbow is fairly sympathetic in *Sartoris*, but by *Sanctuary* she's vicious. How do you account for this?

A. There again I am using the most available tool to tell what I'm trying to tell, and my idea is that no person is wholly good or wholly bad, that all people in my belief try to be better than they are and probably will be. And that if—when I need for a tool a particular quality in an individual I think that quality is there. It can be taken out, and for the moment it leaves the individual in an unhappy light, but in my opinion it hasn't destroyed or really harmed that individual.

Q. In other words, sir, she hasn't developed between novels. You're merely taking a different look at her, the same person.

A. That's right.

Q. Sir, to what extent were you trying to picture the South and Southern civilization as a whole, rather than just Mississippi—or were you?

SESSION ONE

A. Not at all. I was trying to talk about people, using the only tool I knew, which was the country that I knew. No, I wasn't trying to—wasn't writing sociology at all. I was just trying to write about people, which to me are the important thing. Just the human heart, it's not ideas. I don't know anything about ideas, don't have much confidence in them.


Q. In "The Bear," Mr. Faulkner, once again, [at] the end of Part Three, Sam Fathers has died. Does he die in his own little cabin or does he ask Boon Hogganbeck and Ike to take him out and expose him on the four-cornered platform?

A. He knew that he was finished, he was tired of his life, and he—if he had been strong he could have done the deed himself. He couldn't. He asked Boon to, and I think Boon murdered him, because Sam told him to. It was the Greek gesture which Sam himself was too weak to do. He was done, finished. He told Boon to do it.

Q. And Ike knows this, and so tells the rest to let Boon alone?

A. That's right.

SESSION TWO

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PRESS CONFERENCE

... Q. Mr. Faulkner, is this your first visit to the University, by the way?

A. No sir, I was in Charlottesville years ago at a Spring literary festival. I came with Mr. Sherwood Anderson and Mr. Cabell was here then. I don't remember—Paul Green, I believe was here. What year that was I don't recall—about—

Q. '32 or so?

A. '32 or so, yes.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, could I ask you how important you think a college education is to a writer?

A. Well that's—is too much like trying to decide how important is a warm room to a writer. To some writers, some people, the college education might be of great importance, just like some of us couldn't work in a cold room. So that's a question I just wouldn't attempt to answer, and then I'm more or less out of bounds because I didn't have one myself.

Q. I was reading a book . . . yesterday which said that English teachers had gotten a body of American literature and stored it away in musty basements and had sort of stifled the creative impulse in America. . . . Do you think that's true?

A. No sir, I do not. I do not. I think that people read into the true meaning of college lots of things that are not there. I think that there's an importance in college that is—adumbrates a specialty like—of being a writer, that is, the

SESSION TWO

college is to produce first a human being, a humanitarian, and no man can write who is not first a humanitarian, and if the college can supply that to him, then the college is of infinite importance. If he has managed to acquire that outside of college, then he doesn't need the college. But you can't—I don't think you can say that the college makes or mars an artist.

Q. If he has it in him, it'll come out.

A. Yes. I would say that the college would help anyone, but it wouldn't make a writer that wouldn't have made himself—that is, I've never held with the mute inglorious Milton.

...

Q. ... Just why did you accept [the invitation to come to University of Virginia]?

A. It was because I like your country. I like Virginia, and I like Virginians. Because Virginians are all snobs, and I like snobs. A snob has to spend so much time being a snob that he has little left to meddle with you, and so it's very pleasant here.

...

Q. Well, what contribution do you hope to make while you are here?

A. Well, I couldn't say that either, and that's why I hope that maybe there is one I can make. I think the contribution would come out of my experience as a writer, as a craftsman, in contact with the desire of young people to be writers, to be craftsmen, that maybe out of a hundred there may be one that will get something of value from the fact that I was in Charlottesville for a while. If there is one out of a hundred, I think that would be pretty good.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, could you tell me who you think is the most promising young writer in America?

A. I'm not familiar with young writers. Like most writers, as they get old they stop reading—that is, the reading they do is the things they loved when they were young men when they began to read, and so I haven't read a coeval book

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in about fifteen years. I remember a book by a young man named William Styron that I thought showed promise.

Q. *Lie Down in Darkness*?

A. Yes.

...

Q. You aren't conscious of the critic having influenced you at any time? It raises the interesting question of the relationship between the critic and the artist.

A. If I ever listened to a critic I—he probably did influence me, because I think the artist takes everything that he needs from about any source, but I don't know that I ever listened to one, ever read one. But I'm sure that no writer is impervious to criticism. Sometimes he won't read it because he's afraid of what he might feel.

...

Q. Do you like to be where your subject-matter is?

A. Doesn't matter.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, what's your opinion of Tennessee Williams's work?

A. A play called *Camino Real* I think is the best. The others were not quite that good. I saw *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and that was about the wrong people—the problems of children are not worth three acts. The story was the old man, I thought, the father. That's all I know of Williams. *Camino Real* was—it touched a very fine high moment of poetry, I think.

...

Q. I suppose your grandson was an attractive fringe benefit of the second semester position, being near here.

A. Yes.

Q. What of the Southern tradition and heritage do you hope he will continue, and what do you hope won't...?

A. I hope of course that he will cope with his environment as it changes. And, I hope that his mother and father will try to raise him without bigotry as much as can be done. He can

SESSION TWO

have a Confederate battleflag if he wants it but he shouldn't take it too seriously.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, this is an odd question. I wonder whether you might have any comments on the Middle Eastern situation and how you think that's being handled? Just to get your—to get a writer's ideas on this.

A. Well, I think what we need now is not a golf player but a good poker player.

...

Q. Do you write with a particular reader in mind, Mr. Faulkner? Any audience?

A. No, I don't. I wrote for years before it occurred to me that strangers might read the stuff, and I've never broken that habit. I still write it because it worries me so much I've got to get rid of it, and so I put it on paper.

...

Q. Do you write with more ease now than you did when you started? Or do you write with more care, maybe I should say?

A. The fire is not as fierce as it was once. It's—probably I fumble less now than I did then, but I will put off sitting down to do the work more than I used to.

Q. How many more books do you feel that you are going to write? I mean, do you feel impelled to write—do you feel that you're going to write a great many more?

A. Probably, because I'm convinced I'll live to be about a hundred years old. I'll still be working on something then.

...

Q. ... When did you begin [*The Town*]?

A. The last one—it took about a year.

Q. [*The Hamlet*]?

A. Oh no, I did that in nineteen-twenty—

Q. You did [*The Hamlet* in nineteen-twenty—?]—the publication date's 1940.

A. Well, I wrote it in the late twenties.

Q. Did you really? You wrote *The Hamlet* long before it was published?

A. It was mostly short stories. In 1940 I got it pulled together.

...

Q. What is literary about the creative impulse? What makes—what's the difference between being literary and not being?

A. There is a great difference. I don't know whether I could define it, but there's a great difference. There are literary people that have no impulse to create at all, that simply love the atmosphere in which books exist and are produced, that love to talk about books and about ideas.

Q. Excluding your own, Mr. Faulkner, what do you think is the single greatest book in American literature?

A. Probably *Moby-Dick*.

Q. Do you have any qualifications—you say probably—would there be any others that you might—?

A. There are others—*Huckleberry Finn*.

Q. Why do you give *Moby-Dick* the top position?

A. Well, I don't. I'm just naming ones that might be. I wouldn't give it the top position, but if I did, it would be for the reason that I rate Wolfe higher than Hemingway, that *Huckleberry Finn* is a complete controlled effort and *Moby-Dick* was still an attempt that didn't quite come off, it was bigger than one human being could do.

...

Q. Do you have a similar classification of poets as you do novelists?

A. No, I just know the poets whose work I like but I—

Q. Could you tell me whose you like?

A. Yes, *Leaves of Grass* is one of the good books, and I remember when I read more poetry I read Elinor Wylie, Conrad Aiken, E. A. Robinson, Frost.

SESSION TWO

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, do you recall having read Henry James at any time?

A. Yes, without much pleasure. Henry James to me was a prig, except *The Turn of the Screw*, which was very fine *tour de force*....

SESSION THREE

February 20, 1957

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

(Not recorded. Reconstructed from memory.)

[... Q. In connection with the character of Christ, did you make any conscious attempts in *The Sound and the Fury* to use Christian references, as a number of critics have suggested?

A. No. I was just trying to tell a story of Caddy, the little girl who had muddled her drawers and was climbing up to look in the window where her grandmother lay dead.

Q. But Benjy, for example, is thirty-three years old, the traditional age of Christ at death.

A. Yes. That was a ready-made axe to use, but it was just one of several tools.

...

Q. Your work has sometimes been compared with that of Hawthorne's tales with hard-hearted people like Jason. Do you think that one of the things that's wrong with the South is that there are too many characters like this, like Jason Compson, in it?

A. Yes, there are too many Jasons in the South who can be successful, just as there are too many Quentins in the South who are too sensitive to face its reality.

...

Q. In *The Sound and the Fury*, where Quentin sees the boys fishing, does his remark about the big fish have any

SESSION THREE

symbolism? He says to them, I hope you don't catch that big fish, he deserves to be let alone.

A. Well, it doesn't have any meaning by itself, but Quentin knows he is going to die and he sees things much more clearly than he would otherwise. He sees things that are more important to him since he doesn't have to worry about them now, and when he wants the old fish to live, it may represent his unconscious desire for endurance, both for himself and for his people. It is just like when some people know they are going to die, and the dress is burned away and they know they can say things because in a while they won't be around to have to defend them.

Q. In the last part of Quentin's section, why do you begin to omit capitals on the names and on "I"?

A. Because Quentin is a dying man, he is already out of life, and those things that were important in life don't mean anything to him any more.

...

Q. What is the trouble with the Compsons?

A. They are still living in the attitudes of 1859 or '60.

Q. Why is it that Mrs. Compson refers to Benjy as having been sold into Egypt? Wasn't that Joseph in the Bible? Is the mistake yours or hers?

A. Is there anybody who knows the Bible here?

Q. I looked it up and Benjamin was held hostage for Joseph.

A. Yes, that's why I used them interchangeably. . . .]

SESSION FOUR

February 25, 1957

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN WRITING

... Q. I thought I might ask you, Mr. Faulkner, because somebody was speaking of it the other day to me, how you went about writing, how stories came to you. I have a friend, a writer, who has told me sometimes that she will think about her stories for quite a long time and then suddenly they'll be there, and they can be written down without perhaps a great deal of revision or fumbling, that they are there in the mind and they get down on paper that way. Do you have experience of that sort when you write or do you have different things happen?

A. That's sometimes true. I don't think you can make a hard and fast statement about the method of writing, of the conception of a story. It—of course the first thing, the writer's got to be demon-driven. He's got to have to write, he don't know why, and sometimes he will wish that he didn't have to, but he does. The story can come from an anecdote, it can come from a character. With me it never comes from an idea because I don't know too much about ideas and ain't really interested in ideas, I'm interested in people, so what I speak from my experience is probably a limited experience. But I'm interested primarily in people, in man in conflict with himself, with his fellow man, or with his time and place, his environment. So I think there's really no rule for how to begin to write.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, do you think that a writer can teach young writers?

A. I don't think anybody can teach anybody anything. I think ~~that you learn it, but the young writer that is as I say~~ demon-driven and wants to learn and has got to write he don't know why, he will learn from almost any source that he finds. He will learn from older people who are not writers, he will learn from writers, but he learns it—you can't teach it. Then I think too that ~~the writer who's actually hot to say something~~ hasn't got time to be taught. He's too busy learning—he knows what he wants—his instinct says to take this from this man or that from that man. That he's not—he hasn't got time to sit under a mentor and listen to try to learn.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, to get back to this business of style for just a minute. You mentioned in some class I attended that Dostoevsky and Conrad were two people you read a good deal when you were eighteen and nineteen years old. Would you say that you had got something in the way of arrangement of words from Conrad? Every now and then in your stories—I was thinking of a couple of passages in "The Bear," passages here and there in other stories—there are arrangements of cadence, rhythm, which seem to me to be rather like Conrad. I'm thinking of a passage in "Youth," an arrangement of adjectives, "resplendent yet somber, full of danger, yet promising," the description of the East when that young boy comes upon it. There's something of the same kind of use of—kind of heavy arrangement of adjectives I've noticed in your writing. Does that seem a fair—?

A. Quite true. I got quite a lot from Conrad and I got quite a lot from a man that probably you gentlemen, young people, never heard of—a man called Thomas Beer. You probably know the name.

Q. I know the name Thomas Beer in connection with a critical work. Did he write *The Mauve Decade*?

A. . . . Yes, and I got quite a lot from him—was to me a good tool, a good method, a good usage of words, approach to incident. I think the writer, as I said before, is completely amoral. He takes whatever he needs, wherever he needs, and he does that openly and honestly because he himself hopes

that what he does will be good enough so that after him people will take from him, and they are welcome to take from him as he feels that he would be welcome by the best of his predecessors to take what they've done.

...

Q. Sir, speaking of symbolism, in your story "That Evening Sun," why did you name that fellow Jesus?

A. That was probably a deliberate intent to shock just a little. That's a—it's a valid name among Negroes in Mississippi—that is, you don't see it too often, but it's nothing unusual, it's not uncommon, but there may have been a little—not so much to shock but to emphasize the point I was making, which was that this Negro woman who had given devotion to the white family knew that when the crisis of her need came, the white family wouldn't be there.

...

Q. When did you first realize that you wanted to write, sir?

A. I think I had scribbled all my life, ever since I learned to read. I wrote poetry when I was a young man till I found that I—that it was bad poetry, would never be first-rate poetry. And I was in New Orleans, I worked for a bootlegger. This was in '21, '22, '23. I ran a launch from New Orleans across Pontchartrain down the Industrial Canal out into the Gulf where the schooner from Cuba would bring the raw alcohol and bury it on a sand-spit and we'd dig it up and bring it back to the bootlegger and his mother—she was an Italian, she was a nice little old lady, and she was the expert, she would turn it into Scotch with a little creosote, and bourbon. We had the labels, the bottles, everything—it was quite a business. And I met Sherwood Anderson. He was living there, and I liked him right off, and we would—got along fine together. We would meet in the evening, in the afternoons we'd walk and he'd talk and I'd listen, we'd meet in the evenings and we'd go to a drinking place and we'd sit around till one or two o'clock drinking, and still me listening to him talking. Then in the morning he would be in seclusion working, and the next time I'd see him, the same thing, we would spend the afternoon and evening together, the next morning he'd be working. And I thought then if that was the life it took to be a writer, that was

the life for me. So I wrote a book and when I started I found that writing was fun, and I hadn't seen Mr. Anderson in some time till I met Mrs. Anderson on the street. She said, We haven't seen you in a long time. What's wrong? I said, I'm writing a book, and she said, Do you want Sherwood to look at it? And I said, No'm, it's not finished yet. I hadn't thought of anybody looking at it, it was fun to write the book. And I saw her later and she said, I told Sherwood you were writing a book and he said, Good God! Then he said that he will make a trade with you. If he don't have to read it, he will tell his publisher to take it. I said, Done. And so that was how I—my first book got published, and by that time I'd found that writing was fun, I liked it, that was my cup of tea and I've been at it ever since and will probably stick at it.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, from what viewpoint did you write the story from—I believe it was from *These 13*—it was called "Carcassonne"?

A. That was—I was still writing about a young man in conflict with his environment. I—it seemed to me that fantasy was the best way to tell that story. To have told it in terms of simple realism would have lost something, in my opinion. To use fantasy was the best, and that's a piece that I've always liked because there was the poet again. I wanted to be a poet, and I think of myself now as a failed poet, not as a novelist at all but a failed poet who had to take up what he could do.

Q. Sir, in connection with that, there's an old French poem by the name of "Carcassonne"—I forget the author—and it has pretty much the general, the same sort of theme. I wonder if that was in your mind at the time.

A. I don't know the poem, though if I did know it and I had needed to steal from it, I'm sure I would—I wouldn't have hesitated.

Q. What do you mean, Mr. Faulkner, in your story "All the Dead Pilots," and I believe a story called "Honor," in which you give the impression that those people who fought in the war, after those experiences in the war will be dead the rest of their lives?

A. Well, in a way they were. That the ones that even continued to live very long were the exceptions, and the one among them that coped with the change of time or—you can count them on your thumbs almost—Rickenbacker's one but there're not too many others—Bishop, he finally drank himself to death, died last year, and others—Victor Yeates didn't live ten years. In a way they were dead, they had exhausted themselves psychically . . . anyway, they were unfitted for the world that they found afterward. Not that they rejected, they simply were unfitted, they had worn themselves out.

Q. You'd restrict that feeling to people who had been in aviation, not with people who had served in other branches of the armed services?

A. At that time, yes, because there was more concentration of being frightened to flying then than in infantry or ground troops. You just got scared worse quicker and more often flying than you did on the ground.

Q. You seem to distinguish between literary men and writing men. I was wondering if you wouldn't elaborate on that. Are not the two reconcilable? Cannot they be?

A. Yes, I think I said that some writing men are literary men, but I don't think that you have to be a literary man to be a writer. I think that to be a literary man infers a certain amount of—well, even formal education, and there are some writers that have never had formal education. Of course, you can be literary without the formal education, but I've got to talk in terms of what I know about Faulkner now, you see, and Sherwood Anderson—that we were not literary men in the sense that Edmund Wilson is a literary man or Malcolm Cowley, for instance.

Q. . . . What short-story writers do you admire at the present time?

A. Now, that's a difficult question for me because I think not of writers but of the characters. I remember the characters they wrote about without being able to remember always just who wrote the piece. But when I was a young man this

Thomas Beer that I mentioned, he influenced me a lot. Chekhov. Can't think of some of the others.

Q. What about the present writers in your area of the country—a writer like Eudora Welty?

A. Well, I think again of the books rather than the writer. I think of a book of hers called *The Robber Bridegroom* which was quite different from any of the other things she has done which to me was the worthwhile one

...

Q. . . . Do you feel a necessity to . . . tell all the truth about that character that you feel needs to be told regardless . . .

A. No, I think that after about ten books, I had learned enough of judgment to where I could pick and choose the faces of the character which I needed at that particular time to move the story I was telling, so that I can take a facet of one character in one story and another facet of that character in another story. To me it's the same character, though sometimes to the reader it may seem as though the character had changed or had developed more—to me he hasn't. That I used my editorial prerogative of choosing what I needed from that particular character at that particular time.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, how much do you feel that the writer's being involved with people in his writings is dependent upon his being actively involved with real people in the real world?

A. I think that that has nothing to do with the writing. That he can be involved with people, he can be involved with alcohol, or with gambling or anything and it's not going to affect the writer. Now, I have no patience and I don't hold with the mute inglorious Miltons. I think that if he's demon-driven, with something to be said, then he's going to write it. He can blame his—the fact that he's not turning out the work on lots of things. I've heard lots of people say, Well, if I were not married and had children I would be a writer. I've heard people say, If I could just stop doing this I would be a writer. I don't agree with that. I think if you're going to write, you're going to write and nothing will stop you. If you can be involved, and probably the more you're involved, it may

be better for you. That maybe it's bad to crawl off into the ivory tower and stay there—maybe you do need to be involved, to get the edges beaten off of you a little every day—may be good for the writer.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, in the story "Red Leaves," the slave escapes from his Indian captors and goes and hides in the swamp and in order to avert his capture has the cottonmouth strike him in the arm. Then the Indians come and capture him anyway. And—why did this happen in the story? Is this to show that man can't escape his condition?

A. No, that was—the snake episode was to show that man when he knows he's going to die thinks that he can accept death, but he doesn't—he doesn't, really. The Negro at the time, he said, I'm already dead, it doesn't matter, the snake can bite me because I'm already dead, but yet at the end he still wanted to put off—that man will cling to life, that in preference—between grief and nothing, man will take grief always.

...

Q. Many writers beginning to write, usually in their first work make one of their characters, usually the hero, an image of himself. Now, I don't find this true in your writing at all. But may I ask you, do you ever find yourself identifying with one of your characters, and have to resist—for instance someone like Gavin Stevens or just [?] the old man in the last pages of *A Fable* who comes out of the crowd?

A. I don't know whether anyone could say—any writer could say just how much he identifies himself with his characters. Quite often the young man will write about himself simply because himself is what he knows best. That he is using himself as the standard of measure, and to simplify things, he writes about himself as—perhaps as he presumes himself to be, maybe he hopes himself to be, or maybe as he hates himself for being. Though after that, the more you write, the more you see you have to write, the more you have learned by writing, and probably you don't really have time to identify yourself with a character except at certain moments when the character is in a position to express truthfully things

which you yourself believe to be true. Then you'll put your own ideas in his mouth, but they—when you do that they'll become his. I think that you're not trying to preach through the character, that you're too busy writing about people. It just happens that this man agrees with you on this particular point and so he says it.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, you seem to say that a writer should write out of the heart and I am assuming that also—this is an assumption—that you believe that a writer should write from the heart. Now as opposed to writing from the—out of the heart, there's writing out of the glands, which you mentioned before. May a writer successfully write from the glands rather than from the heart?

A. He can successfully do it, like what's his name? Spillane and the toughs theme [?], but it's not good writing, it's not worth doing, in my opinion. It's successful but it ain't worth doing. I—what I meant, to write from the heart is—it's the heart that has the desire to be better than man is, the up here can know the distinction between good and evil, but it's the heart that makes you want to be better than you are. That's what I mean by to write from the heart. That it's the heart that makes you want to be brave when you are afraid that you might be a coward, that wants you to be generous, or wants you to be compassionate when you think that maybe you won't. I think that the intellect, it might say, Well, which is the most profitable—shall I be compassionate or shall I be uncompassionate? Which is most profitable? Which is the most profitable—shall I be brave or not? But the heart wants always to be better than man is.

Q. Was the "Rose for Emily" an idea or a character? Just how did you go about it?

A. That came from a picture of the strand of hair on the pillow. It was a ghost story. Simply a picture of a strand of hair on the pillow in the abandoned house.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, you say you're interested in and have been throughout your writing in people rather than ideas.

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I was just wondering, as you were saying that, about, for example a book like the *Fable*, at what point did the allegory—did you become conscious of it? Obviously you didn't take the idea and impose it, I gather from what you say. What got you into the *Fable*, what—.

A. That was *tour de force*. 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 naturally have got crucified again, and I had to—then it became *tour de force*, because I had to invent enough stuff to carry this 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, had been crucified twice, and maybe we'd have only one more chance

SESSION FIVE

 March 7, 1957

THE ENGLISH CLUB

Q. [The people in *The Hamlet* don't seem to have much contact with the outside world. I was wondering about what time the stories take place. Is it the 1890's, or the next decade?]

A. Well, when you go to the trouble to invent a private domain of your own, then you're the master of time, too. I have the right, I think, to shift these things around wherever it sounds best, and I can move them about in time and, if necessary, change their names. This would be 1906 or 07 this happened. That is, the more you write, the more you've got to compromise with such facts as time and place. And so I've got to agree with Mr. Gwynn and establish this somewhere in time, so it's about 1907.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, have you ever seen such an auction [like that in "Spotted Horses"] taking place?

A. Yes'm. I bought one of these horses once. They appeared in our country, every summer somebody would come in with another batch of them. They were Western range-bred ponies, pintos—had never had a bridle on them, had never seen shelled corn before, and they'd be brought into our town and auctioned off for prices from three or four dollars up to six or seven. And I bought this one for \$4.75. I was, oh I reckon, ten years old. My father, at that time, ran a livery stable, and there was a big man, he was six feet and a half tall, he weighed two hundred pounds, but mentally he was about ten years old, too. And I wanted one of those horses,

and my father said, Well, if you and Buster can buy one for what money you've saved, you can have it. And so we went to the auction and we bought one for \$4.75. We got it home, we were going to gentle it, we had a two-wheeled cart made out of the front axle of a buggy, with shafts on it, and we fooled with that critter—it was a wild animal, it was a wild beast, it wasn't a domestic animal at all. And finally Buster said that it was about ready, so we had the cart in a shed—Estelle probably remembers this—we put a croker-sack over the horse's head and backed it into the cart with two Negroes to fasten it in, to buckle traces and toggles and things, and me and Buster got in the seat and Buster said, All right boys, let him go, and they snatched the sack off the horse's head. He went across the lot—there was a big gate, the lane, it turned it at a sharp angle—it hung the inside wheel on the gatepost as it turned, we were down on one hub then, and about that time Buster caught me by the back of the neck and threw me just like that and then he jumped out. And the cart was scattered up that lane, and we found the horse a mile away, run into a dead-end street. All he had left on him was just the hames—the harness gone.¹ But that was a pleasant experience. But we kept that horse and gentled him to where I finally rode him. But I loved that horse because that was my own horse. I bought that with my own money.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, do you feel that the gap between the people and the law that exists in "Spotted Horses" has closed any since then? . . .

A. Will you explain a little more what that means?

Q. Well, it's so inappropriate, and we feel that in the end it's so ridiculous, really. It's so far from the people and the way they live, and it doesn't seem to apply to them. I just wondered if you felt that it were more appropriate now.

Q. You mean that Mrs. Armstid doesn't get her money back in court?

¹This episode appears in Part 3 of "The Bear" as Ike McCaslin's recollection of his debt to Boon Hogganbeck.

Q. Yes.

A. Oh well, that's one of the natural occupational hazards of breathing, is conflict with the law, with police. I think that all people have to face that and accept it, and do the best they can with it. That's—if she had got her money back, it would have been bad on me because my story would have blown up.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, Eula Varner seems to be the sort of character who in some ways seems almost larger than life and seems to be invested with a meaning that's almost symbolic. When you conceived this character, did she seem to represent, let us say, some of the best aspects of the Varners?

A. No, you're quite right, she was larger than life. That she was an anachronism, she had no place there, that that little hamlet couldn't have held her, and when she moved on to Jefferson, that couldn't hold her either. But then that'll be in the next book, the one that'll be out next month. You're quite right, she was larger than life, she was too big for this world.

Q. You had said previously that *The Sound and the Fury* came from the impression of a little girl up in a tree, and I wondered how you built it from that, and whether you just, as you said, let the story develop itself?

A. Well, impression is the wrong word. It's more an image, a very moving image to me was of the children. 'Course, we didn't know at that time that one was an idiot, but they were three boys, one was a girl and the girl was the only one that was brave enough to climb that tree to look in the forbidden window to see what was going on. And that's what the book—and it took the rest of the four hundred pages to explain why she was brave enough to climb the tree to look in the window. It was an image, a picture to me, a very moving one, which was symbolized by the muddy bottom of her drawers as her brothers looked up into the apple tree that she had climbed to look in the window. And the symbolism of the muddy bottom of the drawers became the lost Caddy,

which had caused one brother to commit suicide and the other brother had misused her money that she'd send back to the child, the daughter. It was, I thought, a short story, something that could be done in about two pages, a thousand words, I found out it couldn't. I finished it the first time, and it wasn't right, so I wrote it again, and that was Quentin, that wasn't right. I wrote it again, that was Jason, that wasn't right, then I tried to let Faulkner do it, that still was wrong.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, one thing that we sometimes seem to see with acquisitive people like the Snopeses is that after they have made the gains which they want very much to make, respectability seems to set in and start to work on them too. Do you see any signs of that happening in that clan?

A. No, only that the rapacious people—if they're not careful—they are seduced away and decide that what they've got to have is respectability, which destroys one, almost anybody. That is, nobody seems to be brave enough anymore to be an out-and-out blackguard or rascal, that sooner or later he's got to be respectable, and that finishes it.

Q. Why aren't they blackguards anymore?

A. They ain't brave and strong and tough like they used to be.

Q. Why not?

A. It's the curse of the times maybe, and maybe there's a—three-or-four-color printing of advertisements have been too seductive or a picture of a fine big car in two colors with a handsome young woman by it so that you almost think the woman comes with the new car to make the installment payments and one is—there's so much pressure to conform, to be respectable.

Q. More than in the Victorians.

A. I think so, yes. In the Victorian they tried to force you to be respectable to save your soul. Now they compel you to be respectable to be rich.

Q. Were these people blackguards to save their souls? I'm not quite sure I understand the connection.

A. Well, I think that possibly the Old Adam in man suggests to him to be a blackguard if he can get away with it, and when there's a great deal of pressure to be respectable, if there is a great enough reward for the respectability, he will choose that in preference to the pleasure of being a scoundrel and a blackguard. That people don't have enough verve and zest anymore, which is not the fault of man so much as the fault of the time that we live in, to where he—there's too much pressure against being an individualist, and a good first-rate scoundrel is an individualist. He don't really belong to a gang. Once he's got to join a gang, he becomes a second-rate scoundrel. But a first-rate scoundrel, like a first-rate artist, he's an individualist, and the pressure's all against being an individualist—you've got to belong to a group. It don't matter much what group, but you've got to belong to it, or there's no place for you in the culture or the economy. Maybe to belong to a gang, you might escape the atom bomb.

Q. Are you saying that he has to be a scoundrel to be an individualist?

A. No sir, I say a scoundrel, to be a good one, must be an individualist, that only an individualist can be a first-rate scoundrel. Only an individualist can be a first-rate artist. He can't belong to a group or a school and be a first-rate writer.

Q. You could have some grudging admiration for Flem Snopes, who pretty well sticks to his character.

A. Well, until he was bitten by the bug to be respectable, and then he let me down

Q. Are there any good Snopeses? That boy of Eck's [Wall Street Panic] seems like a nice little fellow. Is he going to get depraved too?

A. No no. He turned into, in his way, a pretty good boy. He wanted no more of Snopes. He tried to remove himself from the aura and orbit of Snopes.

. . .

Q. Mr. Faulkner, you said before that it was your belief that man would prevail. Well, in the light of this book *The Hamlet* and several others that we've discussed recently, what

type of man do you think will prevail, what kind—the scoundrel?

A. No no, the scoundrel in time is seduced away by the desire to be respectable, so he's finished. There's a—what quality in man that prevails, it's difficult to be specific about, but somehow man does prevail, there's always someone that will never stop trying to cope with Snopes, that will never stop trying to get rid of Snopes.

Q. . . . A remnant?

A. No, the impulse to eradicate Snopes is in my opinion so strong that it selects its champions when the crisis comes. When the battle comes it always produces a Roland. It doesn't mean that they will get rid of Snopes or the impulse which produces Snopes, but always there's something in man that don't like Snopes and objects to Snopes and if necessary will step in to keep Snopes from doing some irreparable harm. Whatever it is that keeps us still trying to paint the pictures, to make the music, to write the books—there's a great deal of pressure not to do that, because certainly the artist has no place in nature and almost no place at all in our American culture and economy, but yet people still try to write books, still try to paint pictures. They still go to a lot of trouble to produce the music, and a few people will always go to hear the music, which still has nothing to do with the number of people that will produce the Cadillac cars or the economy which will give everybody a chance to buy a Cadillac car on the installment plan, or the deep freezes. That is, all that's advertised, it has to be advertised, in order to keep people buying it, but the books, the music, that's not advertised, yet still there are people that will pay for it, will buy the pictures. It's a slow process but yet it apparently goes on. That we will even outlast atom and hydrogen bombs—I don't know right now how we will do it but my bet is we will.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, along this respectability-scoundrel line, how do you explain Colonel Sutpen, who sweeps into Jefferson and grimly sets himself up and at long last decides he'll have respectability . . . ? Does he really lose his individuality or

isn't this respectability just another notch in his rifle, so to speak?

A. He wanted more than that. He wanted revenge as he saw it, but also he wanted to establish the fact that man is immortal, that man, if he is man, cannot be inferior to another man through artificial standards or circumstances. What he was trying to do—when he was a boy, he had gone to the front door of a big house and somebody, a servant, said, Go around to the back door. He said, I'm going to be the one that lives in the big house, I'm going to establish a dynasty, I don't care how, and he violated all the rules of decency and honor and pity and compassion, and the fates took revenge on him. That's what that story was. But he was trying to say in his blundering way that, Why should a man be better than me because he's richer than me, that if I had had the chance I might be just as good as he thinks he is, so I'll make myself as good as he thinks he is by getting the same outward trappings which he has, which was a big house and servants in it. He didn't say, I'm going to be braver or more compassionate or more honest than he—he just said, I'm going to be as rich as he was, as big as he was on the outside.

Q. And he never really attained this respectability?

A. No, he was—the Greeks destroyed him, the old Greek concept of tragedy. He wanted a son which symbolized this ideal, and he got too many sons—his sons destroyed one another and then him. He was left with—the only son he had left was a Negro.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, you have said that you regarded respectability as one of the prime enemies of individualism. Do you regard love as an enemy of individualism?

A. No no. What's love got to do with respectability? No sir, I do not. Respectability is an artificial standard which comes from up here. That is, respectability is not your concept or my concept. It's what we think is Jones's concept of respectability.

Q. I don't mean to defend respectability in love or out. What I mean to do is—Quiet, please!—what I mean to ask is

this. Isn't there a basic dichotomy between the kind of individualism which you are praising and the attitude of love?

A. If you will substitute decency for respectability I would agree with you. I don't quite follow you between respectability and love, decency and love. That's an interesting point. Has anybody else got a thought on that?

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, do you regard *Pylon* as a serious novel, and what were you driving at in that novel?

A. To me they were a fantastic and bizarre phenomenon on the face of a contemporary scene, of our culture at a particular time. I wrote that book because I'd got in trouble with *Absalom, Absalom!* and I had to get away from it for a while so I thought a good way to get away from it was to write another book, so I wrote *Pylon*. They were ephemera and phenomena on the face of a contemporary scene. That is, there was really no place for them in the culture, in the economy, yet they were there, at that time, and everyone knew that they wouldn't last very long, which they didn't. That time of those frantic little aeroplanes which dashed around the country and people wanted just enough money to live, to get to the next place to race again. Something frenetic and in a way almost immoral about it. That they were outside the range of God, not only of respectability, of love, but of God too. That they had escaped the compulsion of accepting a past and a future, that they were—they had no past. They were as ephemeral as the butterfly that's born this morning with no stomach and will be gone tomorrow. It seemed to me interesting enough to make a story about, but that was just to get away from a book that wasn't going too well, till I could get back at it.

Q. I think that perhaps we've taken enough of Mr. Faulkner's energy, unless, sir, you feel the wish to carry on a bit more

A. Well, I've told you, this is a dreadful habit to get into, where you can stand up in front of people and talk and nobody can say, Shut up and sit down.

SESSION SIX

 March 9, 1957

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Q. Sir, a fyce plays a minor part in "Was" and in a few more of your stories, I believe. Well, is a fyce just a mongrel or is he an out-of-the-ordinary mongrel that you might equate with the primitive?

A. He is—in our Mississippi jargon, he is any small dog, usually—he was a fox or rat terrier at one time that has gotten mixed up with hound, with bird-dog, everything else, but any small dog in my country is called a fyce.

Q. Can we look upon him as representing the primitive, such as the bear and the forest?

A. No, he's the—in a way, the antithesis of the bear. The bear represented the obsolete primitive. The fyce represents the creature who has coped with environment and is still on top of it, you might say. That he has—instead of sticking to his breeding and becoming a decadent degenerate creature, he has mixed himself up with the good stock where he picked and chose. And he's quite smart, he's quite brave. All's against him is his size. But I never knew a fyce yet that realized that he wasn't big as anything else he ever saw, even a bear.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, into what strata would these people fit—Mr. Hubert and—

A. They were the aristocracy of provincial Mississippi at that time. It was still frontier. In Natchez they had the fine Empire furniture, people had—they spent their money on ob-

jets d'art from Europe, furnishings and fine clothes. In the country, these people, they were aristocracy, but they were still frontier, they were still the tall man with the long rifle, in a way. That even their splendor was a little on the slovenly side, that they went through the motions of living like dukes and princes but their life wasn't too different from the man who lived in a mud-floored hovel. No, they represented the aristocracy, they were the wealthy, the men of power, the owners of slaves.

Q. Could you explain the significance of the title "Was"?

A. Yes, this was the first chapter in a book which was composed of short stories. It covered a great deal of time. The central character in the book was a man named Isaac McCaslin who was old at the time of the book. But this background which produced Isaac McCaslin had to be told by somebody, and so this is Isaac McCaslin's uncle, this Cass here is not old Ike, this is Ike's uncle. And "Was" simply because Ike is saying to the reader, I'm not telling this, this was my uncle, my great-uncle that told it. That's the only reason for "Was"—that this was the old time. But it's part of him too.

Q. Sir, does the presentation of the ribbon to Uncle Buddy have any significance from medieval tales or anything?

A. Yes, that was Miss Sophonsiba with that belief of hers and her brother too that they were the rightful heirs to the Earldom of Warwick, and Miss Sophonsiba lived on Walter Scott, probably, and she had nothing to do, and she would read the fine flamboyant tales of chivalry where the maiden cast the veil to the knight in the tournament and that was all that was.

Q. Sir, a more general question, not limited to this story. The role of fate seems very strong in your work. Do you believe in free will for your characters?

A. I would think I do, yes. But I think that man's free will functions against a Greek background of fate, that he has the free will to choose and the courage, the fortitude to die for his choice, is my conception of man, is why I believe that man will endure. That fate—sometimes fate lets him

alone. But he can never depend on that. But he has always the right to free will and we hope the courage to die for his choice.

Q. Sir, do you look at your humor as a—with the same inspiration as you do a serious thing or is it more a relaxing kind of work?

A. No, no, it's a part of man too, it's a part of life. That people are—there's not too fine a distinction between humor and tragedy, that even tragedy is in a way walking a tightrope between the ridiculous—between the bizarre and the terrible. That it's—possibly the writer uses humor as a tool, that he's still trying to write about people, to write about man, about the human heart in some moving way, and so he uses whatever tool that he thinks will do most to finish the picture which at the moment he is trying to paint, of man. That he will use humor, tragedy, just as he uses violence. They are tools, but an ineradicable parts of life, that humor is.

Q. What is the significance of the title, "Red Leaves"?

A. Well, that was probably symbolism. The red leaves referred to the Indian. It was the deciduation of Nature which no one could stop that had suffocated, smothered, destroyed the Negro. That the red leaves had nothing against him when they suffocated him and destroyed him. They had nothing against him, they probably liked him, but it was normal deciduation which the red leaves, whether they regretted it or not, had nothing more to say in.

Q. Sir, you use hunting terms all through "Was" when they're chasing Tomey's Turl. Is there any significance to this—I mean, do they think that perhaps this colored man is not about—well, say he's on the same plane as the fox?

A. At that time he was, at the very time that these twin brothers had believed that there was something outrageous and wrong in slavery and they had done what they could. In fact, they had given up their father's fine mansion to let the slaves live in it and they had built a two-room log cabin that they lived in. That they by instinct knew that slavery was wrong, but they didn't know quite what to do about it. And in the heat of the pursuit—well, in daily life, they would use the

terms in which the Negro was on a level with the dog or the animal they ran. And especially in the heat of a race, which—though this was more of a deadlier purpose than simple pleasure, in the heat of running this man the man became quarry that would have received the same respect that the bear or the deer would—that is, the bear or the deer would have had his chance for his life. They wouldn't have betrayed him, tricked him, they wouldn't have built a deadfall for him. They would have run him all fair with the dogs and if he could escape, could kill the dogs and get away, good for him. If he couldn't, it was too bad.

Q. Sir, never having been fox-hunting, what do you mean by "going to earth," as far as Tomey's Turl was concerned?

A. That's when the quarry finds a hole in the ground, a den, and runs into it. The fox before the dogs, he will try first to trick the dogs, and if he can't, then he gets into something that the dogs can't follow him into. He goes—finds an old fox den or something that he knows, that the dogs are too big to follow, he gets in there, he's gone to earth.

Q. Sir, did Tomey's Turl stack the deck, and if so—?

A. Oh yes, because he wanted Tennie and he wanted to go back home and take Tennie with him.

Q. Well, I understood that in the last thing it says that if he—if Mr. Hubert didn't call Uncle Buddy, then everything would stay just the way it was, and that Tomey's Turl would go back with Uncle Buddy and Uncle Buck and that Tennie would stay with Mr. Hubert and leave it just the way it was before.

A. No no, if Uncle Buddy saved Uncle Buck from Miss Sophonsiba, then Uncle Buddy would have to buy Tennie. That was the way the bet was settled, and so Tomey's Turl, he didn't care whether Uncle Buck was safe from Miss Sophonsiba or not, but he wanted Tennie to go back home with him, and so he hunted around, found that last deuce for Uncle Buddy. He was playing for Tennie, Uncle Buddy was playing for his brother, to save his brother. Their aims were the same though the end was slightly different.

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Q. Sir, in another one of your stories, "Percy Grimm," do you think that the type of person that is exemplified there is prevalent in the South today, perhaps in the White Citizens Councils?

A. I wouldn't say prevalent, he exists everywhere, I wrote that book in 1932 before I'd ever heard of Hitler's Storm Troopers, what he was was a Nazi Storm Trooper, but then I'd never heard of one then, and he's not prevalent but he's everywhere. I wouldn't say that there are more of him in the South, but I would say that there are probably more of him in the White Citizens Council than anywhere else in the South, but I think you find him everywhere, in all countries, in all people.

Q. Sir, was Percy Grimm ever punished for his crime?

A. I think in time that every Storm Trooper suffers for it. He don't suffer any retribution, any stroke of lightning from the gods, but he's got to live with himself, and there comes a time when you've got to live with that, when you're too old and the fire which enables you to get a certain amount of hysterical adrenalic pleasure out of things like that is gone, and all you have left is to remember what you did and you probably wonder why in God's name you did things like that, and you have to live with it, and I think that quite often unexplained suicides go back to some man who has done something like that and he gets old, and he's got to live with it, and decides it's not worth living with it.

Q. You spoke a little while ago of Greek themes. I was wondering if you think that modern literature or twentieth-century literature, so to speak, could feature the truly tragic hero that you would find in Greek times, or do you think the characters should be meaner or more simple? . . .

A. That's a difficult question to answer. I think the writer has got to write in terms of his environment, and his environment consists not only in the immediate scene, but his readers are part of that environment too, and maybe nobody can write forever without expecting to be read, and probably a writer, whether he intends to or not, or knows it or not, is going to

shape what he writes in the terms of who will read it. So maybe when there are fine listeners, there will be fine poets again, that maybe the writing that is not too good is not just the writer's fault, it may be because of the environment, a part of which is the general effluvium of the readers, the people who will read it. That does something to the air they all breathe together, that compels the shape of the book. It would be fine if people could write in the old simple clear Hellenic tradition, but then maybe that would be now obsolete, that there was a time for that, the time for that is not now, it may come back, if life does go in cycles.

Q. Sir, in your excerpt from *The Unvanquished*, "An Odor of Verbena," why is that sprig of verbena left on Bayard's pillow right at the very end, when she leaves, she says she's going to abjure verbena for ever and ever, and then he goes off, he walks into town and he meets Mr. Redmond, I believe it is, and then without any gun or anything, and then comes back and the sprig of verbena is left on his pillow.

A. That—of course, the verbena was associated with Drusilla, with that woman, and she had wanted him to take a pistol and avenge his father's death. He went to the man who had shot his father, unarmed, and instead of killing the man, by that gesture he drove the man out of town, and although that had violated Drusilla's traditions of an eye for an eye, she—the sprig of verbena meant that she realized that that took courage too and maybe more moral courage than to have drawn blood, or to have taken another step in a endless feud of an eye for an eye.

Q. But then why did she leave?

A. Because she was at that time too old, she was still too involved in it to accept that morally. I mean accept it physically, that her husband had not been avenged by his own son. That is, her intellect said, This was a brave thing, but the Eve in her said, My husband, my lover has not been avenged. And she could say, You were brave, but she—this is not for me, that I—that sort of bravery is not for me.

Q. Sir, is there any reason for the Southern—the blossom-

ing of Southern writing, that is, are there any circumstances in the Southern environment that would bring about the blossoming of great authors as it has?

A. I don't know. That's a literary question and I wouldn't undertake to answer it. I might say that when that so-called blossoming of Southern writers came along, it was at a time when nobody in the South had much money, they couldn't travel, and they had to invent a world a little different from the shabby one they lived in, and so they took to writing, which is cheaper than—that is, a ream of paper and a pencil is cheaper than a railroad ticket.

Q. Sir, why, in the beginning of your book about—you mention Ikkemotubbe, why does Ikkemotubbe cease to own the land as soon as he realizes that it is saleable, and do the people like the Compsons who have bought the land, do they ever belong to the land in the sense that Ikkemotubbe previously had?


A. No, I don't think they do. I think the ghost of that ravishment lingers in the land, that the land is inimical to the white man because of the unjust way in which it was taken from Ikkemotubbe and his people. That happened by treaty, which President Jackson established with the Chickasaws and the Choctaws, in which they would take land in Oklahoma in exchange for their Mississippi land, and they were paid for it, but they were compelled to leave it, either to leave on—to follow a chimera in the West or to stay there in a condition even worse than the Negro slave, in isolation. There are a few of them still in Mississippi, but they are a good deal like animals in a zoo: they have no place in the culture, in the economy, unless they become white men, and they have in some cases mixed with white people and their own conditions have vanished, or they have mixed with Negroes and they have descended into the Negroes' condition of semi-peonage.

Q. And even the aristocracy, the original aristocracy was tainted. They never owned the land. The land was never theirs.

A. That's right. The Indians held the land communally,

a few of them that were wise enough to see which way the wind was blowing would get government patents for the land. There was one of them, a Choctaw chief, was one of the wealthiest men in Mississippi, Greenwood Leflore, he was wise enough to get a patented deed to his land and to take up the white man's ways, he was a cotton planter, he'd built a tremendous mansion and imported the furnishings from France, and he was quite wealthy. And then when in '61 he declined to accept the Confederacy and Confederate troops were sent in there and his stables were set on fire, the story is that when they demanded that he accept an oath to the Confederacy, he went into the house and got a United States flag and wrapped it around himself and came out and walked into that burning barn and died there, but that's—we don't know whether that's so or not, but that's the legend. But the house is still there, it's a museum now, and his descendants, they are two great-great-nieces. They're mostly white now. They own the place.

SESSION SEVEN

 March 11, 1957

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Q. This is a question about *Light in August*. Could you tell me your purpose in placing the chapter about Hightower's early life in the end of the novel, that is, rather than when Hightower first appears?

A. It may be this. Unless a book follows a simple direct line such as a story of adventure, it becomes a series of pieces. It's a good deal like dressing a showcase window. It takes a certain amount of judgment and taste to arrange the different pieces in the most effective place in juxtaposition to one another. That was the reason. It seemed to me that was the most effective place to put that, to underline the tragedy of Christmas's story by the tragedy of his antithesis, a man who—Hightower was a man who wanted to be better than he was afraid he would. He had failed his wife. Here was another chance he had, and he failed his Christian oath as a man of God, and he escaped into his past where some member of his family was brave enough to match the moment. But it was put at that point in the book, I think, because I thought that was the most effective place for it.

Q. Sir, do you find it easier to create a female character in literature or a male character?

A. It's much more fun to try to write about women because I think women are marvelous, they're wonderful, and I know very little about them, and so I just—it's much more fun to try to write about women than about men—more difficult, yes.

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Q. Sir, in "Delta Autumn," in the thoughts of Ike McCaslin, when he's talking to the colored girl, you write, "Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America, but not now, not now." I was wondering how you might apply that to the present-day conditions that have happened since the writing of the story, with the Supreme Court decision and what not.

A. He used "a thousand or two thousand years" in his despair. He had seen a condition which was intolerable, which shouldn't be but it was, and he was saying in effect that this must be changed, this cannot go on, but I'm too old to do anything about it, that maybe in a thousand years somebody will be young enough and strong enough to do something about it. That was all he meant by the numbers. But I think that he saw, as everybody that thinks, that a condition like that is intolerable, not so much intolerable to man's sense of justice, but maybe intolerable to the condition, that any country has reached the point where if it is to endure, it must have no inner conflicts based on a wrong, a basic human wrong.

Q. Sir, in "Was" you tell us how Uncle Buck successfully foiled an attempt by Mr. Hubert Beauchamp to get him to marry Sophonsiba. Well, eventually they do get married, and I wonder if you could give us any idea as to whether she eventually caught him.

A. Oh, I think that women are much stronger, much more determined than men, and just because these men had wasted an evening over a deck of cards, that hadn't changed Miss Sophonsiba's intentions at all and probably Uncle Buck finally just gave up. That was his fate and he might just as well quit struggling.

Q. Sir, can you tell us where Sutpen acquired his money in "Wedding in the Rain"? First he came back with the architect and all his—all the Negroes or sort of creatures that he had, and built his house, and then later on came back with the furniture.

A. He very likely looted his Caribbean father-in-law's plantation when he married the daughter. I don't know that I ever decided myself just how he did it but very likely he

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looted and wrecked the whole place, took the girl because he didn't want her especially, he wanted a son, he wanted to establish his dynasty. And I imagine that he got that money to the States and then had to hide it here and there. There were no banks in those days, no safe place to put it. Probably was gold, something that was intrinsic of itself, and he would go off wherever he had buried it and dig up a little more when he needed it.

Q. Sir, in your story "The Bear," why did Boon kill Sam Fathers?

A. Because Sam asked him to. Sam's life had finished then. He was an old man, he was sick, and Sam at that point represented his whole race. The white man had dispossessed the whole race, they had nothing left, and Sam was old, he was weak and sick. That was the Greek conception, and Sam knew that Boon and this little boy who was too young to have used the knife or whatever it was, would defend Sam's right to die, and would approve of the fact that Boon, the instrument, was willing to kill Sam, but Sam was done with life, and he wanted that done, and Boon was the servant that did it.

Q. Sir, in "A Rose for Emily" is it possible to take Homer Barron and Emily and sort of show that one represents the South and the North? Is there anything on your part there trying to show the North and the South in sort of a battle, maybe Miss Emily representing the South coming out victorious in the rather odd way that she did?

A. That would be only incidental. I think that the writer is too busy trying to create flesh-and-blood people that will stand up and cast a shadow to have time to be conscious of all the symbolism that he may put into what he does or what people may read into it. That if he had time to—that is, if one individual could write the authentic, credible, flesh-and-blood character and at the same time deliver the message, maybe he would, but I don't believe any writer is capable of doing both, that he's got to choose one of the two: either he is delivering a message or he's trying to create flesh-and-blood, living, suffering, anguishing human beings. And as any man works out

Symbolism ?
dramatic ?

of his past, since any man—no man is himself, he's the sum of his past, and in a way, if you can accept the term, of his future too. And this struggle between the South and the North could have been a part of my background, my experience, without me knowing it.

Q. Sir, why is it, in "Death Drag," Jock left despite Captain Warren's plea to stay there or accept the raincoat or accept any sort of job? Was it anything besides pride that made him leave, fly off in that old crate?

A. Yes, it was—pride was about what it was. The—it's—'course is probably true of all flying people, but I do know that the flying people out of that war, most of them would have been better off if they had died on the eleventh of November, that few of them were any good to try to take up the burden of peace, and this man was lost and doomed. Of course, Warren was different. He had managed to cope with 1919, but this other man would never cope with 1919. He was hopeless, he was doomed.

Q. Sir, in your novels, you said in one of the other classes that you begin with a character in mind or more than one character. In your short stories, do they—do you conceive of them the same way? Do you start with a person or do you—?

A. Sometimes with a person, sometimes with an anecdote, but the short story is conceived in the same terms that the book is. The first job the craftsman faces is to tell this as quickly and as simply as I can, and if he's good, if he's of the first water, like Chekhov, he can do it every time in two or three thousand words, but if he's not that good, sometimes it takes him eighty thousand words. But they are similar, and he is simply trying to tell something which was true and moving in the shortest time he can, and then if he has sense enough stop. That is, I don't believe the man or the woman sits down and says, Now I'm going to write a short story, or Now I'm going to write a novel. It's an idea that begins with the thought, the image of a character, or with an anecdote, and even in the same breath, almost like lightning,

it begins to take a shape that he can see whether it's going to be a short story or a novel. Sometimes, not always. Sometimes he thinks it'll be a short story and finds that he can't. Sometimes it looks like it's to be novel and then after he works on it, he sees that it's not, that he can tell it in two thousand or five thousand words. No rule to it.

...

Q. Do you have any trouble remembering, say, a short story that you might have written in 1925 or something like that?

A. I remember the people, but I can't remember what story they're in nor always what they did. I have to go back and look at it to unravel what the person was doing. I remember the character, though.

...

Q. Do you ever jump up in the middle of the night and write something down?

A. Oh, yes. Yes, lots of times. I've never had any order. I have heard of people that can set aside so many hours a day and—or to write so many words a day, but that has never been for me. I like to write when it's hot and then I quit and rest and then I get at it again. And sometimes, fourteen or sixteen hours a day, and then sometimes I won't write a word for fourteen or sixteen days.

...

Q. Sir, I understand *Sanctuary*, you've said that it was written for the sensational value. Would you say, now, for a young writer who might be trying to break into it, do you think that he should devote his time and talents, if any, towards a sensational type of work, or do you think that he should try to write more or less from the soul, you might say, or write as he feels rather than what he feels might be accepted?

A. I would say, if he is creating characters which are flesh-and-blood people, are believable, and are honest and true, then he can use sensationalism if he thinks that's an effective way to tell his story. But if he's writing just for sensationalism, then he has betrayed his vocation, and he deserves to suffer from it. That is, sensationalism is in a way an incidental tool, that he might use sensationalism as the carpenter picks up

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another hammer to drive a nail. But he doesn't—the carpenter don't build a house just to drive nails. He drives nails to build a house.

...

Q. When you read these books you've read before, Mr. Faulkner, do you find new things in them constantly?

A. In the sense that you find new things in old friends. That is, there's some reason that you like to go back and spend an hour or two with an old friend. It may not be for anything new, unless the evocation with a little more experience on your own part will throw a new light onto something that you thought you knew before and you find now you didn't, that you maybe know a little more about truth, that what the good writers say to the young man, he knows instinctively are true things. Later on, as he knows a little more, he knows why they're true, and in that sense it is something new, yes.

Q. Could you give us some of the titles of these books, Mr. Faulkner?

A. Yes'm. I read *Don Quixote* every year. I read the Old Testament. I read some of Dickens every year, and I've got a portable Shakespeare, one-volume Shakespeare, that I carry along with me. Conrad, *Moby-Dick*, Chekhov, *Madame Bovary*, some of Balzac almost every year, Tolstoy. I haven't thought of Artzybashev in years. I think I'll get him out and read him again—Artzybashev. Gogol. Most of the Frenchmen of the nineteenth century I read in every year.

...

Q. Sir, of the new books you say you occasionally read, have you found any in the last few years that you regard as superior books, superior writing?

A. I remember one about a destroyer in the Pacific by—I believe he was a Virginia man, Eyster? That was, I thought, a pretty good book. There's a young man, a Mississippian, Shelby Foote, that shows promise, if he'll just stop trying to write Faulkner and will write some Shelby Foote. Yes, I've seen a few books, but I don't remember titles nor writers too well. I remember characters and incidents that seem to me to be true, which is the test . . .

Q. What about the Greek tragedies? Do you ever enjoy reading those?

A. When I was young, yes. I haven't read any of the Greek tragedies in a long time, but when I was young, yes.

...

Q. Sir, what do you think of Aristotle's theories about tragedy? Do you—there's a lot of dispute about that now, *The Death of a Salesman*. Do you think he's right or—

A. What theory is this?

Q. That a tragedy must—the hero must be a man of high place so that he can fall all the further.

A. Well, I don't think Aristotle meant by high place what it sounds like. I think he meant a man of integrity, more than a man of aristocracy, unless—is that what you meant by high place?

Q. Well, I'm—that's what I say, I believe he does mean money-wise and society-wise rather than integrity. I'm not an authority, but that's—

A. Well, I think that was because he used the high place, the money, the riches, the title as symbols, that a king must be brave, a queen must be chaste, as simple symbols, as puppets. But tragedy, as Aristotle saw it, it's—I would say, is the same conception of tragedy that all writers have: it's man wishing to be braver than he is, in combat with his heart or with his fellows or with the environment, and how he fails, that the splendor, the courage of his failure, and the trappings of royalty, of kingship, are simply trappings to make him more splendid so that he was worthy of being selected by the gods, by Olympus, as an opponent, that man couldn't cope with him so it would take a god to do it, to cast him down.

...

Q. ... Was your imagination ... circumscribed in a different way in the *Fable* from the way in which it ordinarily works where you didn't have, presumably, the specific historical pattern in mind?

A. I think that whenever my imagination and the bounds of that pattern conflicted, it was the pattern that bulged ...

that gave. When something had to give it wasn't the imagination, the pattern shifted and gave. That may be the reason that a man has to rewrite and rewrite—to reconcile imagination and pattern. Of course, any work of art in its conception when it reaches a point where the man can begin to work has got to have some shape, and the problem then is to make imagination and the pattern conform, meet, be amicable, we'll say. And when one has to give, I believe it's always the pattern that has to give. And so he's got to rewrite, to create a new pattern with a bulge that will take this bulge of the imagination which insists that it's true, it must be.

...

Q. Mr. Faulkner, did you ever find yourself surprised at repeating yourself and say, By Jove, I did that thing better twenty-five years ago, or, By Jove, this is better than it was twenty-five years ago?

A. No, because to me there ain't any better. It's either good or it's nothing, and it's—what I did twenty-five years ago didn't suit me and so I forgot that. I'm working on another one, I hope that this one is going to be the right one. Of course, I know it ain't but the one twenty-five years ago is under the bridge. It's too bad, but there's nothing I can do about it anymore, except write a new one.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, do you think an author has his prerogative to create his own language? In other words, to go against what the people create, vernacular? Do you think an author has the right to create his own—I believe Joyce and Eliot have done it—have tried to create, they found that language was not—did not suit their purposes, so they had to go beyond and make a—

A. He has the right to do that provided he don't insist on anyone understanding it. That is—what I'm trying to say is—that I believe I'm paraphrasing Whitman, didn't he say, "To have good poets we must have good readers, too," something like that? Who knows?

Q. Whitman, "great audiences."

A. Well, the writer, actually, that's an obligation that he

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assumes with his vocation, that he's going to write it in a way that people can understand it. He doesn't have to write it in the way that every idiot can understand it—every imbecile in the third grade can understand it, but he's got to use a language which is accepted and in which the words have specific meanings that everybody agrees on. I think that *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses* were justified, but then it's hard to say on what terms they were justified. That was a case of a genius who was electrocuted by the divine fire.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, it's often been said about great novels or great short stories that they wouldn't pass muster in a freshman English composition course. Now I was wondering, since this is your first stay at a university, if you had any comments on the traditional or the apparently traditional conflict between the creative writer and the schoolman.

A. Well, as an old veteran sixth-grader, that question is I think outside of my province, because I never got to freshman English. I don't know how much it would conflict. Maybe before I've left the University I will be able to pass freshman English.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, with more and more capable Negroes coming to the fore in all facets of public life, do you believe that half a dozen capable Negro fiction writers could do a world of good for the segregation problem?

A. I do, yes.

Q. Well, out of seventeen million people and some of them becoming very adequate physicians and lawyers, don't you believe that they can develop some writers of stature also?

A. I do, yes. I think that people like Armstrong and Dr. Ralph Bunche and George Washington Carver have done much more for the Negro race than all the N.A.A.C.P. leaders, much more, and there's no reason at all why the Negro shouldn't produce good writers. He has got to have—he's got to be freed of the curse of his color. He's got to have equality in terms that he can get used to it and forget that he is a Negro while he's writing, just like the white man hasn't got

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time to remember whether he's a Gentile or a Catholic while he's writing, and the Negro has got to reach that stage and the white man has got to help him because he can't do it by himself under these conditions.

Q. He's in the best position to write sympathetically about his own conditions?

A. He should be, yes. But you can't write sympathetically about a condition when it's constant outrage to you, you see. You've got to be objective about it.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, do you look on Ike McCaslin as having fulfilled his destiny, the things that he learned from Sam Fathers and from the other men as in his—when he was twelve to sixteen? Do you feel that they stood him in good stead all the way through his life?

A. I do, yes. They didn't give him success but they gave him something a lot more important, even in this country. They gave him serenity, they gave him what would pass for wisdom—I mean wisdom as contradistinct from the schoolman's wisdom of education. They gave him that.

Q. And was—did he ever have any children? Was he able to pass on this—

A. No, no children.

Q. —that had been transmitted to him?

A. In a way, every little eight- or ten-year-old boy was his son, his child, the ones that he taught how to hunt. He had passed on what he had. He was not trying to tell them how to slay animals, he was trying to teach them what he knew of respect for whatever your lot in life is, that if your lot is to be a hunter, to slay animals, you slay the animals with the nearest approach you can to dignity and to decency.

Q. Do you often find that you can't improve on what you've originally put down?

A. Oh yes, yes. I think any writer keeps at it until he knows that that's the best he can do. It may not be good enough, but when he realizes that's the best he can do, then he moves on to the next sentence or the next paragraph.

Q. That's not exactly what I meant. I mean, you say you write as fast as you can to get it out, and then you go back and build up the constructions in there and—

A. No, no. I didn't mean that. I mean that I don't like to—the mechanics of putting the stuff on paper, and I'll try to get it in shape in my mind before I take the—do the work. I didn't mean that I scribbled and then went back over it and edited, no. It's done as much as possible mentally until it begins to sound right. Then I put it down.

Q. Sir, in your writing you try to get very close to people and draw people as you think they are. What do you think of the approach of men like Mencken and Shaw, who really—well, possibly I'm wrong, but I don't think they try to give the public the picture of people, they rather try and slap them in the face a little bit and paint an extreme?

A. Well, they were using the tools of their trade as they believed they were the best tools. I think that Shaw was trying to write about human beings in the light of his own intelligence and his own wit and his own distaste for certain conditions. I think that Mencken was still a constantly angry, indignant man more—he was first that. He was only second a critic, a sociologist, he was mainly just a mad man. Shaw, of course, wasn't. Shaw was an artist.

Q. You mentioned a while ago, in noting some of the books that you liked particularly, *Madame Bovary* and also Tolstoy. I take it from what you also said that the things you admire about these two very different artists would be the fact that they both hit the truth, Flaubert in his extremely precise . . . way, Tolstoy in his almost shapeless way. Would you say something about your own preferences or attitudes toward the different extremes of craftsmanship in *War and Peace* as opposed to *Bovary*?

A. Well, in *Bovary* I saw, or thought I saw, a man who wasted nothing, who was—whose approach toward his language was almost the lapidary's, that he was, whether he had the leisure—I don't know exactly what the term I want—that is, a man who elected to do one book perfectly, in the charac-

ters, and in the method, in the style, as against a man who was so busy writing about people that he didn't have much time to bother about style and when he did attain style, he was just as astonished as anybody else. Though that comparison I grant you is better between Flaubert and Balzac, maybe. Well, I think of the man that wrote *Salamambo* and *La Tentation de St. Antoine* and *Madame Bovary* was a stylist who was also—had enough talent to write about people too. But everybody can't do that, everybody can't do both, you have to choose maybe, What shall I do, shall I try to tell the truth about people or shall I try to tell the truth in a chalice.

Q. Does the luxuriance of the foliage in *War and Peace* offend your sense of craftsmanship?

A. No. No, nothing—I'm not enough of a conscious craftsman to remember that I have ever been offended by any style or method. I think that the moment in the book, the story, demands its own style and seems to me just as natural as the moment in the year produces the leaves. That when Melville becomes Old Testament, Biblical, that seems natural to me. When he becomes Gothic, that seems natural to me, too, and I hadn't, really hadn't stopped to think, Now where does one change and become another? Though with the *Bovary* it's as though you know from the very first as soon as you see what he's going to do that he will never disappoint you, that it'll be as absolute as mathematics.

SESSION EIGHT

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Q. Mr. Faulkner. This is sort of a question of motivation for the writer. Many of the best Southern writers write about the degeneration of the old aristocracy and the determination to live and to think according to the old traditions and standards. Now do you think that this continued determination on the part of those around him causes the writer to revolt against this system, and accordingly is it a—does this attitude—does it furnish a motivation for writing?

A. It does, in that that is a condition of environment. It's something that is handed to the writer. He is writing about people in the terms that he's most familiar with. That is, it could have sociological implications, but he's not too interested in that. He's writing about people. He is using the material which he knows, the tools which are at hand, and so he uses the instinct or the desire or whatever you will call it of the old people to be reactionary and tory, to stick to the old ways. It's simply a condition, and since it is a condition it lives and breathes, and it is valid as material.

Q. Sir, I believe you were in Europe in 1923 at the same time Anderson and Hemingway and others [were]. At that time, did you associate with them, and if not, was there any specific reason why you were not thrown together, and do you think the group was influenced or influenced each other in any way from their association?

A. They may have. I think the artist is influenced by all in his environment. He's maybe more sensitive to it because he

has got to get the materials, the lumber that he's going to build his edifice. I—at that time I didn't think of myself as a writer, I was a tramp then, and I didn't—I wasn't interested in literature nor literary people. They were—I was—there at the same time, I knew Joyce, I knew of Joyce, and I would go to some effort to go to the café that he inhabited to look at him. But that was the only literary man that I remember seeing in Europe in those days.

...

Q. Sir, it has been argued that "A Rose for Emily" is a criticism of the North, and others have argued saying that it is a criticism of the South. Now, could this story, shall we say, be more properly classified as a criticism of the times?

A. Now that I don't know, because I was simply trying to write about people. The writer uses environment—what he knows—and if there's a symbolism in which the lover represented the North and the woman who murdered him represents the South, I don't say that's not valid and not there, but it was no intention of the writer to say, Now let's see, I'm going to write a piece in which I will use a symbolism for the North and another symbol for the South, that he was simply writing about people, a story which he thought was tragic and true, because it came out of the human heart, the human aspiration, the human—the conflict of conscience with glands, with the Old Adam. It was a conflict not between the North and the South so much as between, well you might say, God and Satan.

Q. Sir, just a little more on that thing. You say it's a conflict between God and Satan. Well, I don't quite understand what you mean. Who is—did one represent the—

A. The conflict was in Miss Emily, that she knew that you do not murder people. She had been trained that you do not take a lover. You marry, you don't take a lover. She had broken all the laws of her tradition, her background, and she had finally broken the law of God too, which says you do not take human life. And she knew she was doing wrong, and that's why her own life was wrecked. Instead of murdering one lover, and then to go on and take another and when she used him up to murder him, she was expiating her crime.

Q. . . . She did do all the things that she had been taught not to do, and being a sensitive sort of a woman, it was sure to have told on her, but do you think it's fair to feel pity for her, because in a way she made her adjustment, and it seems to have wound up in a happy sort of a way—certainly tragic, but maybe it suited her just fine. !!

A. Yes, it may have, but then I don't think that one should withhold pity simply because the subject of the pity, object of pity, is pleased and satisfied. I think the pity is in the human striving against its own nature, against its own conscience. That's what deserves the pity. It's not the state of the individual, it's man in conflict with his heart, or with his fellows, or with his environment—that's what deserves the pity. It's not that the man suffered, or that he fell off the house, or was run over by the train. It's that he was—that man is trying to do the best he can with his desires and impulses against his own moral conscience, and the conscience of, the social conscience of his time and his place—the little town he must live in, the family he's a part of.

...

Q. In "The Bear," Mr. Faulkner, was there a dog, a real Lion?

A. Yes, there was. I can remember that dog—I was about the age of that little boy—and he belonged to our pack of bear and deer dogs, and he was a complete individualist. He didn't love anybody. The other dogs were all afraid of him, he was a savage, but he did love to run the bear. Yes, I remember him quite well. He was mostly airedale, he had some hound and Lord only knows what else might have been in him. He was a tremendous big brute—stood about that high, must have weighed seventy-five or eighty pounds.

Q. In any bear hunt that Lion participated in, did he ever perform a heroic action like the one in the story?

A. No, not really. There's a case of the sorry, shabby world that don't quite please you, so you create one of your own, so you make Lion a little braver than he was, and you make the bear a little more of a bear than he actually was. I am sure that Lion could have done that and would have done

it, and it may be at times when I wasn't there to record the action, he did do things like that.

Q. This question is also concerned with "The Bear." In conclusion of the story, Ike McCaslin finds Boon destroying his rifle. Now I was wondering if this incident just showed that Boon could not, shall we say, compete with the mechanical age, or whether this was showing the end of an order, the fact that Lion and old Ben were dead, that the hunters weren't returning to the cabin any more, and the land had been sold to a lumber company.

A. A little of both. It was that Boon, with the mentality of a child, a boy of sixteen or seventeen, couldn't cope not only with the mechanical age but he couldn't cope with any time. Also, to me it underlined the heroic tragedy of the bear and the dog by the last survivor being reduced to the sort of petty comedy of someone trying to patch up a gun in order to shoot a squirrel. That made the tragedy of the dog and the bear a little more poignant to me. That's the sort of *tour de force* that I think the writer's entitled to use.

...

Q. I know that you stated that you don't read the critics regarding your own work. However, I wonder what ideas you have regarding the aims or the proper function of a literary critic, not only of your works, but shall we say of others as well.

A. I would say he has a valid function, a very important function, but to me he's a good deal like the minister—you don't need to listen to him unless you need him, and I in my own case, I know, I have already decided about the value of my work. There's nothing anybody can tell me I don't know about it, and the critic, nor I either, can improve it any by that time and the only way to improve it is to write one that will be better next time, and so I'm at that and I probably just don't have time to read the critics.

...

Q. What would you have done if they had asked you to make changes [in your first novel]?

A. Well, I don't know, because I had lost my bootlegging job of the—I believe the Federal people finally caught him,