

Nobel Prize in Literature 1949



William Faulkner

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1949 was awarded to William Faulkner "for his powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel".

William Faulkner is essentially a regional writer, and as such reminds Swedish readers now and then of two of our own most important novelists, [Selma Lagerlöf](#) and Hjalmar Bergman. Faulkner's Värmland is the northern part of the state of Mississippi and his Vadköping is called Jefferson. The parallelism between him and our two fellow countrymen could be extended and deepened, but time does not allow such excursions now. The difference - the great difference - between him and them is that Faulkner's setting is so much darker and more bloody than that against which Lagerlöf's cavaliers and Bergman's bizarre figures lived. Faulkner is the great epic writer of the southern states with all their background: a glorious past built upon cheap Negro slave labour; a civil war and a defeat which destroyed the economic basis necessary for the then existing social structure; a long drawn-out and painful interim of resentment; and, finally, an industrial and commercial future whose mechanization and standardization of life are strange and hostile to the Southerner and to which he has only gradually been able and willing to adapt

himself Faulkner's novels are a continuous and ever-deepening description of this painful process, which he knows intimately and feels intensely, coming as he does from a family which was forced to swallow the bitter fruits of defeat right down to their worm-eaten cores: impoverishment, decay, degeneration in its many varied forms. He has been called a reactionary. But even if this term is to some extent justified, it is balanced by the feeling of guilt which becomes clearer and dearer in the dark fabric at which he labours so untiringly. The price of the gentlemanly environment, the chivalry, the courage, and the often extreme individualism was inhumanity. Briefly, Faulkner's dilemma might be expressed thus: he mourns for and, as a writer, exaggerates a way of life which he himself, with his sense of justice and humanity, would never be able to stomach. It is this that makes his regionalism universal. Four bloody years of war brought about the changes in the social structure which it has taken the peoples of Europe, except the Russians, a century and a half to undergo.

It is against a background of war and violence that the fifty-two-year-old writer sets his more important novels. His grandfather held a high command during the Civil War. He himself grew up in the atmosphere created by warlike feats and by the bitterness and the poverty resulting from the never admitted defeat. When he was twenty he entered the Canadian Royal Air Force, crashed twice, and returned home, not as a military hero but as a physically and psychically war-damaged youth with dubious prospects, who for some years faced a precarious existence. He had joined the war because, as his *alter ego* expressed it in one of his early novels, «one doesn't want to waste a war». But out of the youth who once had been thirsting for sensation and battle, there gradually developed a man whose loathing of violence is expressed more and more passionately and might well be summed up by the Fifth Commandment: Thou shalt not kill. On the other hand, there are things which man must always show himself unwilling to bear: «Some things», says one of his latest characters, «you must always be unable to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor and shame. Not for kudos and not for cash - Just refuse to bear them.» One might ask how

these two maxims can be reconciled or how Faulkner himself envisages a reconciliation between them in times of international lawlessness. It is a question which he leaves open.

The fact is that, as a writer, Faulkner is no more interested in solving problems than he is tempted to indulge in sociological comments on the sudden changes in the economic position of the southern states. The defeat and the consequences of defeat are merely the soil out of which his epics grow. He is not fascinated by men as a community but by man in the community, the individual as a final unity in himself, curiously unmoved by external conditions. The tragedies of these individuals have nothing in common with Greek tragedy: they are led to their inexorable end by passions caused by inheritance, traditions, and environment, passions which are expressed either in a sudden outburst or in a slow liberation from perhaps generations-old restrictions. With almost every new work Faulkner penetrates deeper into the human psyche, into man's greatness and powers of self-sacrifice, lust for power, cupidity, spiritual poverty, narrow-mindedness, burlesque obstinacy, anguish, terror, and degenerate aberrations. As a probing psychologist he is the unrivalled master among all living British and American novelists. Neither do any of his colleagues possess his fantastic imaginative powers and his ability to create characters. His subhuman and superhuman figures, tragic or comic in a macabre way, emerge from his mind with a reality that few existing people - even those nearest to us - can give us, and they move in a milieu whose odours of subtropical plants, ladies' perfumes, Negro sweat, and the smell of horses and mules penetrate immediately even into a Scandinavian's warm and cosy den. As a painter of landscapes he has the hunter's intimate knowledge of his own hunting-ground, the topographer's accuracy, and the impressionist's sensitivity. Moreover - side by side with Joyce and perhaps even more so - Faulkner is the great experimentalist among twentieth-century novelists. Scarcely two of his novels are similar technically. It seems as if by this continuous renewal he wanted to achieve the increased breadth which his limited world, both in geography and in subject matter, cannot give him. The same desire to experiment is shown in his mastery, unrivalled among modern British and American novelists, of the richness of the English language, a richness derived from its

different linguistic elements and the periodic changes in style - from the spirit of the Elizabethans down to the scanty but expressive vocabulary of the Negroes of the southern states. Nor has anyone since Meredith - except perhaps Joyce - succeeded in framing sentences as infinite and powerful as Atlantic rollers. At the same time, few writers of his own age can rival him in giving a chain of events in a series of short sentences, each of which is like a blow of a hammer, driving the nail into the plank up to the head and securing it immovably. His perfect command over the resources of the language can - and often does - lead him to pile up words and associations which try the reader's patience in an exciting or complicated story. But this profusion has nothing to do with literary flamboyance. Nor does it merely bear witness to the abounding agility of his imagination; in all their richness, every new attribute, every new association is intended to dig deeper into the reality which his imaginative power conjures up.

Faulkner has often been described as a determinist. He himself, however, has never claimed to adhere to any special philosophy of life. Briefly, his view of life may perhaps be summed up in his own words: that the whole thing (perhaps?) signifies nothing. If this were not the case, He or They who set up the whole fabric would have arranged things differently. And yet it must mean something, because man continues to struggle and must continue to struggle until, one day, it is all over. But Faulkner has one belief, or rather one hope: that every man sooner or later receives the punishment he deserves and that self-sacrifice not only brings with it personal happiness but also adds to the sum total of the good deeds of mankind. It is a hope, the latter part of which reminds us of the firm conviction expressed by the Swedish poet Viktor Rydberg in the recitative of the Cantata presented at the Jubilee Degree Conferment at Uppsala in 1877.

Mr. Faulkner - The name of the southern state in which you were born and reared has long been well known to us Swedes, thanks to two of the closest and dearest friends of your boyhood, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Mark Twain put the Mississippi River on the literary map. Fifty years later you began a series of novels with which you created out of the state of Mississippi one of the landmarks of twentieth-century world literature;



novels which with their ever-varying form, their ever-deeper and more intense psychological insight, and their monumental characters - both good and evil - occupy a unique place in modern American and British fiction.

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