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Pilkington, The Heart of Yoknapatawpha

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John Pilkington. *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981. 352 pp. \$24.95

In this new and important study of William Faulkner's best works, John Pilkington offers his readers original and provocative criticism of the nine novels published between 1929 and 1942 and set in the famous Yoknapatawpha County. *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Unvanquished*, *The Hamlet*, and *Go Down, Moses* comprise the heart of Faulkner's saga of life in his corner of northern Mississippi. They also are the works in which the novelist explored most thoroughly the verities of the human heart, the evil that lay within man himself, and according to the critic, advocated "traditional humanistic values" (297).

Pilkington demonstrates how the novelist applied his creative imagination to hard historical fact to convey an impression of how contemporary life is shaped by forces of the past: "Faulkner realized that if life is to have any profound meaning for the individual, that meaning must be reached through history" (169). By establishing the two poles of history at the time of the Civil War and the time of his own writing, "Faulkner learned how the past could be made to illuminate the problems of the present and how the polarities of history could be made to measure motion and the quality of life" (33). Faulkner also revealed much about the materials of history and how historians approach the task of recording it. By having the same story, or at least fragments of the same story, told by a variety of narrators such as in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner showed how difficult it is to produce an accurate record by piecing together bits of truth tainted by many human vessels. Faulkner placed the burden of understanding the meaning of history upon the reader himself, because the reader is forced to sift through the scraps of evidence provided, analyze the sources, draw his own conclusions, and in the process become a participant, to be touched himself by the forces of the past.

At the practical level Pilkington offers a glimpse of the novelist in his workshop taking the facts at his disposal, filling in the gaps, forming a work of art to make history relevant to the individual. There is a clear summary of the dramatic family history of the novelist that became the background for *Sartoris*, the true story from which Faulkner created the bizarre tale of Temple Drake and Popeye in

Sanctuary, the record of extinct settlements in Lafayette County that Faulkner knew, the real lynching, and the life of Faulkner's own Mammy Callie Barr who was given a fictional counterpart in Molly Beauchamp. Faulkner found in his own time and place all of the hard facts that he needed; what set him apart from others was that he put in the hard work and had the talent to lift those facts to universal significance.

As a work of criticism, *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* attempts to bring Faulkner and his best works to a comprehensible, human level. Plot summaries are given where needed, and in the case of Faulkner's convoluted narration, this is often. Themes that tie the novels together are explicated, but there is no artificial wrenching of the works to fit any preconceived notion about them. Inconsistencies, careless slips, and ambiguities of meaning are noted, but they do not deny the thoroughly-explained successes of the novelist. Some of Faulkner's characters, such as those in *As I Lay Dying*, Pilkington contends, may not have been intended as epic characters but simply used by the novelist to remark upon the naturalism of human sexuality. Faulkner's unique style has flaws as well as virtues. Faulkner's own human feelings, hard struggles as a writer, and his sometimes flip-pant comments about some of his works help to bring him down to a level where other humans, including other writers, can identify with him and thus perhaps find more meaning in his works. The deification of Faulkner, as so often has happened, serves only to render him disservice; Pilkington does not wish to perpetuate that disservice.

Pilkington presents Faulkner's fiction as "more a continuation of logical development from the American nineteenth century than the outpouring of a radical innovator or experimenter" (295). Faulkner had before him, to name only a few, the frontier romances of James Fenimore Cooper, the social chronicles of Ellen Glasgow, the rise and fall of great families in the writings of Edith Wharton and William Dean Howells, the works of several humorists of the Old Southwest, and the fragmented style of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Pilkington believes that Faulkner's "contribution to American literature rests not so much upon his ideas about artistic form, his narrative skills, the devices of his fiction, or even his stylistic accomplishments — important though these matters are — as it does upon the intensity and sincerity with which he has depicted the complexities of human experience measured by the progression of history" (295).

The author of this study has produced a useful book for the novice

who wants an introduction to Faulkner and his works, for the scholar who wants fresh insights about the well-known novels, and for the teacher of Southern history, such as myself, who wants a manageable single volume for his own reference and to recommend to students. Pilkington's essays are masterpieces of organization and clarity, but they allow the power and passion of the genius novelist to pull ahead, to set his works apart from the confines of his time, his own limited humanity, and become timeless, multi-layered portraits of all humanity. Pilkington makes the novels comprehensible without diminishing the fire of their creator. As long as the Faulkner novels still pique the interest of readers, *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* will be a valuable guide to students of history, of literature, and of life.

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