William Faulkner's Mississippi, Panel Discussion

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GW: Mr. Blotner, can you make any comments that these people might not know about that relate to Faulkner's interest in hunting in the woods, or about farming either, that might be of interest to the audience? And it might tie into something they saw in the film.

JB: I suppose one thing that could be said is that as a young man he went out for the fellowship and went out for the game and he learned the woods and learned to hunt different kinds of game and got his share of it. And as the years went on he accepted the responsibility that came as he moved up in the hierarchy of the hunt and as he became the senior man. I think one of the things that's most interesting is that I have the sense that, as we read in the fiction and as time went on, he became less and less interested in the actual dead meat and more interested in the fellowship of the hunt. And that it came to mean much more to him. As Mr. Ernest said in "Race at Morning" about the big buck that you don't get—as he says to the little boy, "What would you rather do? Have his meat and head and hide in the pickup headed back to Jefferson or would you like to have him here again next year for us to hunt when we come again?"

GW: Miss Kerr, you have visited here a lot and know a good deal about the people: do you find the kind of thing that was happening—what we just saw a scene of in the movie—do you find Mississippians, and Faulkner included of course, to...
be maybe better story tellers than people from other sections of the country who might have the same kind of hunt?

EK: Well, I haven't heard any hunting stories from the hunters, you see. Yes, I would say storytelling, yes, but not particularly that subject.

GW: Somebody asked yesterday, are Mississippians just born storytellers? And I don't think anybody has an answer to that, but I think that maybe it's more a rural thing than an urban thing and some people do find themselves enjoying the hunt because of the fellowship and stories and so on.

EK: I would like to say something pertinent to what Mr. Blotner was saying, because I was waiting for someone to bring that up. I think "Race at Morning" is a story that is not as well known as it should be because it was published only in a magazine version and then in *The Big Woods*. Ike McCaslin is a hunter in that story; he is an old man, but he's a hunter. And Mr. Ernest has adopted this boy who was simply deserted by his family, is bringing him up, teaching him to be a farmer. And then, every fall they go out hunting for two weeks. And Mr. Ernest, the old man, tells the boy that they have to farm for 50 weeks a year to earn the privilege of hunting for two weeks. And he makes the point about not killing the buck, leaving it to hunt again next year. And the boy, you know, would like to live this kind of life more of the time. And then he said that the boy has got to go to school. He knows what is right, but he's got to go to school and learn why it's right. Then also he can tell other people what is right and why it's right. And I have read that as kind of an implicit reflection on Ike McCaslin who did not do those things. He didn't do much of anything the time he wasn't hunting apparently from the accounts you get in the references to him in *The Town* and *The Mansion*, and he didn't enter into any kind of life vigorously except the hunting. So, I read that—the fact that Ike McCaslin was one of those old hunters—I read that as a kind of follow-up comment on the limitations of Ike McCaslin.

GW: What I'd like to do is let Mr. Blotner say something and then turn the session to dialogue; so be thinking of some questions.

JB: The thing I had in mind actually goes back to the dialogue. One thing that interested me in this film was to see this
JS: That's all right. The camp is located over in the Delta and it's now a farm ranch. It's all been cleared of the woods, and it's close by the Tallahatchie River, the location which is known as the Big Eddy. And the Big Eddy was an eddy in the river that the hunters stayed clear of because they'd get in that bend and get lost; they'd come out at the river and then they wouldn't know which way to go. So they stayed clear of the Big Eddy. But, the camp as I remember now—I was only about 6 or 7 years old, when I went there and Bill was there. But I remember them sitting around at night playing poker and drinking from the bottle. And I remember the mornings where the hunters all would start out into the woods, the delicious breakfasts that we would have. Three and four kinds of meat—and in those days bear were in the woods and we would actually have bear meat to eat at the camp—along with venison, squirrel, and of course the meat that they brought from home, sausage and hams. We didn't eat much steak in those days. If we did, it was venison steak or bear steak. And I remember Bill on the camp because there were always two or three boys about my age along and he took a lot of time entertaining us, during the day when they would come in from hunting, and before the night poker playing began.

GW: Thank you very much. I think we can take questions now.

Q: Mr. Blotner, I have not perused your biography on Faulkner, but I plan to. I am quite interested in what Faulkner has to say about universities in *Faulkner in the University*. I'm concerned that some larger, more pertinent issues of this film be misdirected, and I'm concerned about what were your reactions to some of the more egregious errors. But I'm wondering,
what is the tempo in Mississippi now? What kind of racial climate do you have? A number of questions came to my mind as I viewed this film. Are blacks still experiencing economic restrictions? Is there a fear of miscegenation? I ask these because I've been concerned with these questions ever since I arrived on campus. In fact, yesterday afternoon I went to the Mississippi Room and found a thesis called “Faulkner's Attitude Toward Negroes.” How would you describe the racial climate in communities in the vicinity of Oxford at the present time?

GW: I think I can briefly say that when I saw the film I talked to some people who saw it with me and I said, “I have an idea that the people who made this film would be surprised at the progress that has been made since that time.”

JB: My fundamental criticism of the film is that much of it seemed to be to me a familiar attempt to use parts of William Faulkner's works for what I call polemical purposes. Not purposes for art. It's true he was concerned about relations between people in the state of Mississippi. But, if you think of the number of books that he wrote, and think of the amount of time in that film, there was a disproportionate amount, to my mind, spent on the anguish and the problems which he would not deny but which he put, it seems to me, in a larger perspective. Now, I'm being bold in answering in the presence of these Mississippians, and I hope that they will give me their forebearance. And I came here first during the time of tension, and I've come back often and each time I've felt more cordiality and more personal warmth than before, and it was there before. So as an outsider coming in here from time to time, you could call me a Pollyanna if you like, and I'm not going deeply into sociological things I don't know well. But all of the responses I feel are positive, and that's why this film for one thing is badly out of date.

EK: I agree, and I agree on even more grounds than Mr. Blotner because I've not only been coming down here longer than he has, for fairly long stays, but I was on the campus in the fall of 1962. So, I have been just amazed and delighted with the change that has taken place and the feeling that I get that
most of the younger people are not even aware of how much change has taken place. They simply take it for granted.

Q: Don't you think one problem with that film is that it was produced during a moment of national tension, and it shows a Northern bias?

GW: Yes, I think so. And what bothered me was that I thought it might be possible that somebody might still be using it now as a social studies film. And that did bother me considerably. But Mississippians are law-abiding people; and once a law is passed, people abide by the laws. And while it is true that you can't legislate that people will like each other, I think the things that we saw at the end of the film in the section about race relations are certainly borne out by what's happened since then. We've had almost a generation now, with black and white children going to school together—abiding by the law. So I think that people who made the film would certainly be surprised by the progress that has taken place.

Q: I'm wondering, what impression do you think he wanted and meant to leave with his life and his writings?

JB: That's the one big question that maybe this whole conference will finally make some answer to.

Q: I'd like to ask the attorney [Bill Lamb] a question. Who wrote your dialogue other than yourself.

WL: I think the white whiskey wrote most of it. No. The whole idea was to start talking, have a few drinks, and our tongues became loosened and we started arguing about whether or not there would be panthers as they called them, in those particular woods, and of course, I took the position that there were none.

One comment on William. A question a while ago was about the solitude of Mr. Faulkner: in the 50's and early 60's I did quite a bit of fishing, water skiing, and motor boating on Sardis and even before that William Faulkner would be sailing and he would sail by himself, be sitting in the sailboat when you would go fishing or water skiing; you'd come back two hours later, his pipe would still be in his mouth and he was all by himself. He just had not changed positions at all and of course the only thing that I can think is that he was just sitting...
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there to be alone. To enjoy himself and the outdoors and to think. You could, I could, and others too, pass him on the street uptown on the square and one day he’d speak and talk forever and the next day I’d speak to him and he’d never see me. He was writing a book somewhere. He could be alone in a crowd.