

## General Introduction

UNLIKE THE NOVELS of most of his high Modernist counterparts, Faulkner's greatest works—*The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses*—are about families, generations of Mississippi families, and, perhaps most of all, they are about marriage, in its most inclusive sense. In current critical terms we would say that the politics of racialized desire are central to Faulkner's imaginative vision. So, it is surprising that those politics in his life and family history remain untraced. We have little sense of the relation of Faulkner the Southerner, the son, lover, friend, husband, or parent to the tortured marriages and love affairs in his fiction. Biographical assessments of Faulkner and his actual world tell a great deal about the family patriarch, Colonel William C. Falkner, who died years before William's birth, but little about Callie Barr, Maud Falkner, and Estelle Oldham. These three generations of North Mississippi women were *alive* when Faulkner was and were at least as important as Colonel Falkner; they and their communities are heard across the entire spectrum of his imaginative domain. Looked at together with the men and women to whom they are joined, they can teach us much that is fresh and new about the art and craft of Faulkner's fiction.

Archival work, interviews, and new primary-source materials have further confirmed the rich reality of Faulkner's relations with the three crucial women I focus on. These different perspectives provide an unfamiliar view of the artist's inner life and his creative process. This view suggests strongly that while his relations with both men and women naturally formed and informed his vision of sexuality, his fictions of love and desire, his relations with the women in and outside of his family, rather than his connections

with a tenuous and questionable masculine ideal, shaped both his understanding of what it meant to love and his vision of what an artist and a man could be.

Caroline (“Callie”) Barr, the black ex-slave who raised the artist from infancy and later cared for the Faulkners’ daughter, Jill, lived “with” him in the old shotgun cabin behind his antebellum house until her death, in 1940. In past Faulkner biography and criticism, Callie’s only family is the Falkner brothers, who called themselves “her white children.” My reconstruction of *her* story, her post–Civil War migration from South Carolina to Mississippi, supplemented with interviews of members of her *own*, black family, substitutes reality and dimension for the “Mammy” tales of previous biographies.

Who was this articulate and bossy African American woman who two generations of her employers’ children claim ran Maud’s and then Estelle’s households? Her stories “spell-bound” three generations of Faulkner children. How do Faulkner’s competing and conflicted identifications with his dark and light “mothers,” Callie and Maud, fuel his imaging of psychic fragmentation, of desire, and of identity itself as fluid and tenuous? What do the compulsively reiterated tropes of repulsion, shame, and desire, portrayed as seeing but not touching, or as touching only when coated with dirt or mud, or as “negro-rank smell,” have to do with the politics of race and sex in Faulkner’s fiction? Jill says that “the women Pappy most loved and admired were Granny, Mammy Callie, and Aunt Bama.”<sup>1</sup> Callie was central to Maud’s household, but of her relationship with Maud and, later, Estelle, we know little. Nothing is written about Callie’s own family, though her daughters lived within a day’s walk of Oxford and she had great nieces in Freedman Town with whose mother she pieced her last wedding-ring quilt. In her community she was loved and feared. In some ways she was as much an outsider as Faulkner would choose to be in his. Faulkner’s Modernist novels’ tropes of loss have their genesis in his education into race by his black and white mothers. These originary human connections, connections he *never* abandoned, inform the politics of race and gender in his greatest fiction. Yet little or nothing is known about them.

We can caricature Faulkner’s mother, Maud Butler Falkner, as the little old lady in size three Buster Browns, but that fails to illuminate. She was certainly controlling and probably “tough as shoe leather” and “mean as a snake.” However, these and other descriptions don’t touch on the extent and nature of her intelligence, her creative sensibilities, her iconoclasm, or her quiet but withering wit. Nor do they explain the devotion of her sons and women friends. She was reserved, “austere,” say some, but she was full of life. Interviews reveal an intricate and tightly knit group of women with

whom she played bridge, went driving (she preferred to drive—not be driven), and attended the movies, which she loved, and the Memphis dog races. She was passionate about her children and about literature. Her literary tastes were as eclectic as her famous son's: she read everything from the classics to murder mysteries. When her young children were confined by measles to a darkened room, she read to them, lying beneath one of their beds with a lamp. In the year before she died, Maud's library borrowings included Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekov, and Turgenev. Her "library courier" reported that she confided to him that her current "bedtime" favorite was *The Caine Mutiny*.<sup>2</sup> Her daughter-in-law Louise Meadow said Maud was reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the bathtub when she had her final stroke.<sup>3</sup>

Maud also loved to paint. Some of her late paintings still survive. How did her imaginative and very visual perceptions of reality transmute to Faulkner's art? Both Maud and Callie passed on their strengths and weaknesses, passions and prejudices, to young Willie, as his mother first called him. Together but apart, they educated him into his culture's Jim Crow codes of white Southern masculinity and femininity. So did his father and paternal grandfather. Alcohol played a prominent role in that education. Despite Maud's and Callie's deep apprehension and disapproval, Faulkner began tipping before he was in his teens. Drinking as a trope for faux masculinity is embedded in his fiction. There, it also serves as an anodyne for unbearable loss that cannot be mourned and a metaphor for total disorientation, paralysis, psychic numbness, and boundary dissolution.

Faulkner's and Estelle's families had known each other since at least the 1870s: the two children became friends at age six. The Murry Falkners and Lem Oldhams moved to Oxford and onto the same street within a year of each other, and by 1908, if not earlier, the three oldest Falkner boys, their cousin Sallie Murry Wilkins, and the two Oldham girls began "running over" those "streets all night" together and "living only in the present."<sup>4</sup> From early adolescence until at least 1929, Willie (later called Billy and Bill) shared his writing with Estelle. From 1918 to 1924, while living in American colonial enclaves in Hawaii and Shanghai, Estelle began to write fiction that was, in part, her response to and revision of themes central to the poetry Billy read to her and gave her during those years. Yet, unlike his poetry, her stories embraced realism and social critique. Although she was no Zelda Fitzgerald, her unpublished short tales are competently crafted, humorous, sad, and particularly insightful on the Jim Crow world of the pre- and postwar South and the casual racism of American Colonials in Shanghai during the 1920s. When she first returned to Oxford with them in late 1924, they became the basis for the continuation of an imaginative

collaboration with Faulkner that led to his own sudden and remarkable artistic breakthrough in early 1925. Like her mother-in-law, Estelle was also a visual artist. She had taken lessons in the early twenties while living in Shanghai and continued painting until her marriage to Faulkner in 1929. In 1962, after his death, she began painting again. In fascinating contrast to her mother-in-law's professed realism, Estelle's paintings were surreal and impressionistic transformations of reality.

Unlike Maud's and Callie's materially austere lives, Estelle Oldham's world was rich in all variety of outward show. Shortly after her family moved to Oxford in October 1903, they rented a large two-story house on South Street. Two years later, Estelle's father, Lem, bought a much more showy Victorian home on the corner of South and Fillmore, just two blocks away from Willie's grandfather's "Big Place." It was a house built for socializing, with a wrap-around porch, lovely gardens, and later, a tennis court. The Oldhams were social snobs who claimed American ancestry as far back as the *Mayflower*, a snobbery Estelle mocked in an autobiographical short story she wrote in the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Lem Oldham owed his position as clerk of the federal court of North Mississippi to his step-father-in-law, the well-known Republican judge Henry C. Niles. Republicans were anathema in Oxford, and while Judge Niles transcended the "stench" of Reconstruction associated with that party in Mississippi, his son-in-law did not. Unlike his father-in-law, Lem Oldham was a terrible businessman and was thus primarily dependent on the Republican Party for his income. The family's social snobbery was often sniffed at in Oxford. It is a constant refrain among the women who knew the family that Lida Oldham "pushed Estelle." Jill says, "I think that all of Nanny's children were a disappointment to her—her only son dying in the flu epidemic, and the pretty daughter [Victoria] who married well and then promptly died. And Ma-ma—whom they thought they'd married off—and then she made a botch of it. And then Aunt Dot [Dorothy Oldham] just generally making a botch of life. That didn't please Nanny at all. Those children just didn't do what they should have done. Nanny was very easy-going as far as I was concerned. But I think she was extremely hard on her own children. There was not much love lost between Nanny, Aunt Dot, and Ma-ma."

Lida Oldham worked by indirection: "Nanny had the delightful habit that seems to run in the family—of talking about people when they were in the room. For example, Aunt Dot would be in the room and Nanny would start discussing her in definitely uncomplimentary terms like, 'Isn't Dorothy's hair-do terrible?' or something unkind like that. She did that all the time to both Ma-ma and Aunt Dot. But she never said anything mean or ugly to them directly. It was just as though they were not there."<sup>6</sup> Her

mother could not complain about Estelle's looks because her daughter was always immaculately groomed. So instead she'd criticize her for her house-keeping or for not being a dutiful daughter.

Lemuel Oldham was equally controlling in his own quiet way. He determined that "Estelle would marry well—to a family that could trace every ancestor back a long time. In Mississippi particularly, family is important. And when Ma-ma was twelve or thirteen, Granddaddy and Nanny started scouting the eligible families and decided which direction they intended Ma-ma to go. Marrying Cornell Franklin was strictly an arrangement between Granddaddy and Mr. Franklin."<sup>7</sup>

Faulkner chose to be an outsider. He had strong support from his mother. In different ways, Estelle's parents were outsiders too. And they were not as wealthy as they seemed. Estelle spent nearly ten years in a lonely, demanding, and unsatisfying marriage to her first husband, Cornell Franklin. Financial, cultural, and familial constraints compelled her to stay married until Cornell wanted a divorce. Then, with no independent income or family support, she attempted to support herself. She had begun writing fiction, perhaps as early as nine years before her divorce. Evidence indicates that she intended to sell it. Her extant short stories are as good as much of the women's magazine fiction being published at the time. Estelle was also an exquisite seamstress and loved this work. She often designed her own and her daughters' clothes, sewing without patterns. At least twice, in the 1930s and 1940s, she adopted the profession of one of her own fictional protagonists, organizing showings of her gowns and using as models students at Ole Miss and friends from Oxford and Memphis.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from their iconoclasm, Estelle and Maud seem totally unlike. Yet, apparently, Faulkner needed both. He was neither naïve nor young when he and Estelle married in 1929. Despite much talk of divorce by both, the marriage lasted. We have read about Faulkner's infidelities, Estelle's hysteria, and her drug dependency. Viewing her as Disease and Faulkner as Myth, we have effectively silenced both. Estelle is much more than a spoiled Southern Belle, a part she played to the hilt when necessary. "Mama played up the 'clinging-vine' 'Southern Belle' business when required, but she was really the least clinging person I've almost ever known," observes the Faulkners' daughter.<sup>9</sup> Estelle's life tells a great deal about her husband's life and art.

In reconstructing these women's lives and reading Faulkner's life and art into the rich political, cultural, and emotional landscape their biographies provide, I focus on three historical and biographical issues that directly inform Faulkner's thematics and poetics. The first is Willie's and Estelle's ear-

liest experiences with the black and white women who mothered them, in what Anne Firor Scott, and others, have shown was a patriarchal but matri-focal world governed by apparently rigid racial and sexual hierarchies and boundaries. Within their own families, however, these boundaries were extraordinarily fluid. Both Estelle's and Faulkner's imaginative representations of racial and sexual relations reflect and comment on this conflicted cultural discourse. Faulkner reveals an important part of its essence in an early screen memory representing his "two mothers." He recalls himself as a three-year-old homesick child being carried through the night between two women who simultaneously attract and repel him. One is dark, warm, and sensual: "she must have carried me." The other is blond, cold, and "aloof," but "she was holding the lamp."<sup>10</sup>

This remarkable conflation of race and sexuality is a core fantasy that fuels his imaginative visions of desire and loss from his early, handmade and self-illustrated dream-play, *The Marionettes* (1920), to *Go Down, Moses* (1942) and beyond. Often in his fiction, a tortured and torturing pierrotique male lover merges these two images in one woman (as Joe Christmas does with Joanna Burden in *Light in August*). In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner invents four generations of black and white brothers and sisters (races are literally split and merged) to continue his fictive exploration into the meanings of and relations between racism, gender, desire, and sexuality. Because this splitting or doubling is a constant source of creative tension in his poetry and fiction, it is worth looking at its extra-literary origins. From whom did he learn to split and why? What are the implications in a culture where white men and women say again and again that their black nurse "was my real mother"? Faulkner's changing relations with the women in his family and other women in his life are reflected in the increasing complexity, dexterity, and brilliance with which he gives imaginative form to these questions. My chapters on Caroline Barr and *Go Down, Moses*, the novel Faulkner dedicated to her, explore these questions, as do those on Faulkner's and Estelle's childhood and adult imaginative collaborations, which culminate with his second great creative breakthrough, *The Sound and the Fury*. New evidence reveals that both *Go Down, Moses* and Faulkner's first great novel have a history and afterlife that also tries to capture, contain, and explain that loss. Throughout *Faulkner and Love*, I trace a pattern of multiple splittings that he imposed on all the women he loved. Most vividly, Estelle was both "black" and "white," while their daughter was alternately "Jill" and "Bill."

The sense of impotence—the inability to create that Faulkner's earliest poetic personae experience—has been explained as his creative response to the loss of Estelle Oldham in April 1918, when she married Cornell Frank-

lin and moved with him to Hawaii. Although that loss was doubtless a precipitating event, we must look further back to understand both the formal and psychological implications of his ultimately triumphant fictional blurring and merging of racialized gender distinctions, and the consummate ease with which he handles his polymorphous characters. Supportive as they were, his two “mothers”—one black and one white—seem to have been a source of his fears of artistic impotence. In a family headed and supported by Faulkner’s inarticulate and hard-drinking father, these two women, Maud and Caroline, controlled the word and, between them, taught the young artist the power of language to cut or caress. They also had little use for the grown men in their lives. Homophobia and Southern codes of masculinity also worked against Faulkner’s choice of art as a vocation. In Oxford, only women and men like Stark Young and Ben Wasson (both of whom were gay and had left Mississippi) attempted to be artists. In this context it is important to remember that Faulkner was the South’s first great novelist and that art in the South, particularly, was a sissified occupation. He really had no significant male models: the *living* storytellers and the visual artists in his family were all women.

My second historical and biographical issue is the cultural and psychological role of alcohol in Estelle’s and Faulkner’s actual and imaginative worlds, particularly its function in initiating and defining white Southern masculinity, segregating the social lives of men and women, educating its white children into the codes of Jim Crow, and in inuring them to sexual and racial violence and child abuse. There is a relationship between alcoholism and Faulkner’s tropes of suicidal and homicidal violence, of sadism, psychic numbness, and total dissolution of identity. We need to understand why, in both Faulkner’s and Estelle’s fiction, there are so many scenes of adolescents being forced by their elders to drink.<sup>11</sup> We can then begin to understand his and Estelle’s addiction as, in part, a cultural disease and a legacy of slavery.

Of equal importance in exploring the relationships among creativity, sexuality, and alcoholism is Faulkner’s recurring trope of Estelle Oldham as the Fatal Dancer. Discussion of the Dancer includes Pierrot, her besotted partner. The most interesting of his poems and poem sequences center on these two central images of late romanticism, symbolism, and early Modernism. However, Faulkner’s original attraction to them did not stem merely from their literary ancestry. Rather, these highly charged symbols of desire draw their emotional power from the artist’s reality. I suggest that he chose them, or they chose him, because they mirrored central aspects of his relations with women, but especially with Estelle Oldham. She once said that although she never recognized any of Faulkner’s characters as herself, she

had noted that her husband's more savage inventions often displayed some of her worst qualities. This frank and insightful remark is characteristic of the woman who has emerged from my research.

That Estelle Oldham was the seductive and exhibitionistic Dancer, and Faulkner the voyeuristic and often sadistic Watcher, is well documented. She was quintessentially theatrical and her theatricality played directly into Faulkner's. In his poetry and fiction, the dance (literal and figurative), often coupled with alcohol, is always threatening. Pierrot and his fictional successors silence and literally still the Dancer in order to hear their own "silent music." In Faulkner's fiction, such dances are always racialized and often end in literal or psychological murder. One has only to recall Faulkner's jazzy collagelike dance scenes in *Soldiers' Pay*, or Red's, Popeye's and Temple Drake's, or Joe Christmas's and Joanna Burden's, or Quentin's and Caddy's, or Quentin's and Dirty Natalie's carefully choreographed dances of shame, hatred, and desire to recognize the incipient power of this early vision.

The third issue is the relation between what I call collaborative fantasy, Faulkner's creativity, and his raced and gendered self-representations. The historic difficulties and repercussions of defining oneself as an artist in Mississippi in the first third of the twentieth century were transmuted into art in Faulkner's fiction and in Estelle's unpublished short stories. But each paid a price for tampering with cultural mythologies: Estelle for rejecting the Southern mystique of the "ice maiden" and attempting to alter her image as the Southern Belle; Faulkner for tearing at the myths of Southern Manhood and white supremacy epitomized in his self-naming as "black man" and poet. What pleasures and dangers did Estelle and Faulkner share as they experimented with self-representation in life and fiction in ways that either flouted cultural structures governing race and gender or revealed their hypocrisy?

Faulkner did not draw clear boundaries between his art and his life; masking and theater define and shape his erotic relationships and his art. In his poetry and fiction, masking as well as racial and gender transformations constantly attend the consciousness of characters who ask, in one way or another, "Who am I?" In *The Marionettes*, Faulkner's 1920 dream-play, Pierrot woos Marietta in the guise of his shade, and, as I have shown in *Origins*, Faulkner's drawings of his heroine bear an uncanny resemblance to photographs of Estelle Oldham, photographs taken shortly before and early in her marriage to her first husband, Cornell Franklin. Thus masking and theater figure prominently in one of Faulkner's earliest imaginative productions, which was, in part, a reworking of his already long relationship with Estelle Oldham. It is well known that Faulkner delighted in role-

playing in his life as in his art. What is not common knowledge is that his wife joined him, that the two had acted together since childhood and shared equally in an attendant love for costume, and that their private theater remained central to their marriage. It is this aspect of their relationship that I want to introduce here, because theater played a role in all of his relationships and because it illustrates vividly one of the many ways Faulkner's marriage, contrary to popular conceptions, fueled his creativity. Let me first sketch the outlines of that popular conception.

In Faulkner biography, Estelle Oldham is, to use one of Faulkner's favorite poetic adjectives, an "opaque" but negative and somewhat pitiful figure. By all accounts, including Faulkner's own, she is the millstone around the great author's neck. Coming to him as used goods, she merely repeated the role she had played with her first husband before they divorced in 1929.<sup>12</sup> Faulkner's letter to his editor Hal Smith asking to borrow five hundred dollars to finance his marriage establishes the basis for this interpretation. In it, he claims dramatically that he is marrying because

[I] both want to and have to. THIS PART IS CONFIDENTIAL. UTTERLY. For my honor and the sanity—I believe life—of a woman. This is not bunk; neither am I being sucked in. We grew up together and I don't think she could fool me in this way; that is, make me believe that her mental condition, her nerves, are this far gone. And no question of pregna[n]cy: that would hardly move me: no one can face his own bastard with more equanimity than I, having had some practice. Neither is it a matter of a promise on my part; we have known one another long enough to pay no attention to our promises. It's a situation which I engendered and permitted to ripen which has become unbearable, and I am tired of running from devilment I bring about. This sounds a little insane, but I'm not in any shape to write letters now. I'll explain it better when I see you.<sup>13</sup>

Note here the stagy quality of Faulkner's cleverly balanced rhetoric, his piling up of negatives, his hyperbolic exaggeration as, like one of his most famous characters, Rosa Coldfield, he denies only to suggest and claims to accept blame only to shift charges of manipulation to his lover. I include this letter because it conveys in Faulkner's own words the accepted version of why he and Estelle Oldham married and why, despite affairs with which he taunted her, they remained married. Here is a typical description of Oldham's state of mind shortly before her marriage to Faulkner: "[Faulkner's] stalling and uncertainty [about whether to marry her] threw Estelle into a panic. Unless he married her, how could she go on living—she, a 32-year-old divorcee with two children? A failure in the eyes of her

family and friends, worse than that to the town at large? Without him she felt she had nothing, was nothing. For the sake of her sanity, of her life, he must marry her. She had no one else to turn to. Her nerves were gone, her mind, too. He was her last hope.”<sup>14</sup>

Here, as in all other biographies, she appears as the Southern Belle gone bad—a caricature of failure, helplessness, and hysteria. In fact, the role of Southern Belle was one Estelle assumed with apparent ease, when it suited her purposes. Her daughter notes that she used it as “a protective screen, very much like Pappy used his ‘I’m just a dirt farmer’ role.”<sup>15</sup> Note that Faulkner is also stereotyped, as a dutiful son and an honorable Southern gentleman: “Estelle’s frantic helplessness appealed to his sense of honor. . . . Here was a chance to prove to his father and Major Oldham . . . that he was a *man*, not a wastrel.”<sup>16</sup> Such biographical fictions distort our perceptions of Faulkner the person and Faulkner the artist. The author has, for example, a history of *seldom* concerning himself with others’ opinions. That he would allow one of the most important decisions of his life to be dictated by the opinions of two men he neither admired nor respected seems far-fetched at best. But, perhaps most disturbingly, this portrait insists that—again, according to this biography—“there was a wall of irreconcilable difference between Faulkner and Estelle which made real intimacy impossible.”<sup>17</sup> Such a view persists in spite of the *facts* of a virtual lifetime of mutual attachment that began when Willie and Estelle were six or seven years old, was continued throughout Estelle’s eleven-year marriage to her first husband, and concluded with the Faulknors’ own thirty-three-year marriage. The deletion of all erotic and affectionate material from surviving letters Faulkner wrote his wife from Hollywood and New York in the 1930s and early 1940s in the published *Selected Letters* reinforces such interpretations, especially in the light of Meta Carpenter’s memoir of her affair with Faulkner during just those years. To suggest that Faulkner spent his life with a woman with whom he had no real relationship debases both partners.

But in virtually every portrayal of Estelle, her hysteria, her alcoholism, her narcissism, her profligacy, her exhibitionism, and her stupidity are her most commonly noted qualities. There is more to her than that.

Our interpretation of his letter to Hal Smith changes if, rather than allowing ourselves to be seduced by its histrionics, we remember its intent—to get a loan, an advance on *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner will write many of these letters to his various editors in the course of his life. In all of them he presents himself similarly.<sup>18</sup> Our interpretation also changes if we look for the letter’s fictional parallels and read it as part rhetorical ploy and part

practice arena for Faulkner's fictions of love and desire. For besides being rhetorically convincing, this letter is a shorthand version of some of the most redundant and powerful images of desire in his novels. Like Joe Christmas in *Light in August* or Jack Houston in *The Hamlet*, Faulkner, too, is tired of "running" from his own devilment. Like Houston and his wife, Estelle Oldham and he have known each other forever.

In *The Hamlet* Faulkner elaborates on this fiction. There, Houston says of his desire, "It seemed to him that it had been in his life always, even between those five years between his birth and hers; . . . that he himself had not begun to exist until she was born, the two of them chained irrevocably from that hour and onward forever." Like many of Faulkner's tortured men, Joe Christmas's and Houston's organizing fantasy, or fiction of love, fuses infancy and childhood with adult erotic desire: the woman he marries has been in his life before he was born. Houston wants it all. But because this fusion is incestuous, and therefore forbidden, his conscious response must be to fight it. He sees himself chained "not by love but by implacable constancy and invincible repudiation—on the one hand, that steadfast and undismayable will to alter and improve and remake; on the other, that furious resistance" (206).

Theater springing from the tension of yoking antitheses was as important to the structure of Faulkner's love affairs as it was to the formal concerns of his poetry and fiction. One thinks of him in Hollywood in the 1930s insisting to his twenty-eight-year-old lover, Meta Carpenter, that she wear hair ribbons like a teenager, as well as of Meta's and other women's comments that he was more passionate in letters than he ever was in the flesh. Or of the nasty and transparent fiction he, Ben Wasson, and Meta Carpenter performed for Estelle the summer of 1936, when Meta went to dinner at the Faulkners' Hollywood apartment as Ben Wasson's date.<sup>19</sup> There are dozens of examples; a brief reminiscence, "Faulkner: A Flirtation," in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1987, provides a nice vignette of the writer flirting with a young admirer. In this instance, he assumes the guise of Januarius Jones, one of his earliest self-parodies.<sup>20</sup> The *Times* essay aptly illustrates Faulkner's habit of almost immediately imposing his own fictional frame upon any potentially romantic relationship. During the ten years he wrote poetry almost exclusively, his most favored persona was Pierrot, the quintessential masker. Cyrano de Bergerac, who wooed his true love in the guise of another man's voice, was another of his favorite characters. Throughout his life he cribbed from Cyrano to woo a series of women, including Helen Baird in the 1920s and Joan Williams and Jean Stein in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> In short, when we read Faulkner's 1929 letter to his editor in the

dual contexts of his erotic and aesthetic life, its meaning changes. The letter's fictional drama and the practical function of that drama are revealed.

The Faulkners' daughter, Jill, describes growing up in a household in which masks were the order of the day:

Living with Ma-ma and Pappy was like living on a stage-set. Everybody was playing a role. You never knew who was being what today. They played roles to each other and, largely, I was left out of it. There was always lots of storming up and down the stairs and threats on my mother's part to slash her wrists. She really liked playing tragic parts. They both enjoyed it, and even I got to know it was not for real. But it was pretty exciting. The only time I touched base, you know, hit the ground in the real world, was when I went to school. When I walked back through the gates at Rowan Oak, it was like Alice going down the rabbit hole. I never knew exactly what would be at the end of the hole when I reached my front porch. . . . Pappy always—it would be hard for me to say that I could look at him at one point and say, “this is who he really is,” because, almost always, he was playing a part. When I was young, it gave me a feeling of unreality. I never knew whether I was real to them.<sup>22</sup>

As it had been in Estelle's and Willie's childhood games, costume was part of this theater. When she grew older, Jill could often predict the tone and theme of the evening's performance when she saw what her mother was wearing as she came down to dinner:

When Ma-ma was getting ready to really have a major scene, she wore major clothes for it. . . . If we were going to have a real confrontation—you know, “My life is wasted, I've been abused”—then it would usually be something really elegant. If it were going to be a fairly smooth, uneventful evening, it would just be an ordinary, decent type of dress. And then, if it were going to be a “Aren't we all happy together in this nice little threesome here in the country” sort of thing it would—there was just a difference in her dress that would fit that too. Life was never dull at Rowan Oak. Pappy did the same thing. He liked to play the country squire but he also liked to play the good ole' boy with all the men from the fishing camp or the hunting camp and he changed his clothes and his accent accordingly. To a certain extent Ma-ma was the same way.

So often what was said was said for effect, and so often the position that was taken was taken for effect. It didn't really reflect anyone's true feelings on the matter. What I'm really trying to say is that people had roles. Everyone had—they were standing back and watching themselves play this particular part.<sup>23</sup>

She also notes that both her parents “enjoyed making grand gestures” and that “they had a life of gestures together.”<sup>24</sup>

Theater was not reserved for special occasions, however, and often entered into the daily routine. A friend of Jill’s loved to visit Rowan Oak because it was so much more interesting than any other home in town. “It was the atmosphere—I always felt like they sort of—it was like a play, maybe.” Even a family meal at Rowan Oak was a performance:

Well, to me Mrs. Faulkner—she was not the greatest housekeeper, but she had a lot of flair. I mean you could have the simplest food but it would be served up buffet on silver platters. It was just great. Nobody’s mother actually cooked. But she could cook when she wanted to. She was very inventive, very artistic with whatever she did—cooking, gardening, sewing—she made beautiful clothes. It was a household that was so entirely different from anything I knew. I enjoyed going down there so much. It was just highly entertaining.

Jill’s friend makes the following comparison:

At our house, we ate in the dining room only for Sunday dinner and when company came. Well, the Faulkners always ate in the dining room—except for in the winter when everything was frozen as we didn’t have any central heating. But, no matter how simple the meal was, it was very elaborately served. Mr. Faulkner was at one end and the plates were stacked and he served the dinner—he served the meal and everything, always. And even if it were bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches, it would all be on silver trays with the lettuce beautifully arranged. I thought it was the greatest. I think they all enjoyed it.

Faulkner’s daughter’s comments about her parents reveal more similarities in her parents’ likes and dislikes than differences: “My parents went out of their way to make my friends feel welcomed, and they always enjoyed them. They both tried to be careful that none of my friends saw them drinking. There were exceptions like the time when Pappy ruined my birthday.”<sup>25</sup>

Estelle also told Jill and her friends stories she invented based on characters in Hawaiian folklore. Jill says: “Ma-ma would weave fantastic tales around them which we would mix in with our own remake of whatever movie was playing at the matinee that week. Our main props, besides our ponies, were the trees and grapevines in the garden at Rowan Oak. We’d do a lot of climbing and swinging.”<sup>26</sup> Besides making up tales for her daughter, Estelle wrote some fiction of her own. In fact in the late 1920s, Faulkner sent Scribner’s a coauthored story (originally Estelle’s), which they re-

jected.<sup>27</sup> There is also Estelle's fictionalized memoir, "Dr. Wohlenksi." Deliberately autobiographical, it tells much about her feelings when, as an almost seven-year-old girl, she was just about to move from Kosciusko to Oxford. In this story, she already privileges the imagination and sees herself as, therefore, different. After offering her good-night prayers, she is admonished for asking God to "deliver me from playmates. Grown-ups—white and colored—were far superior company" (22). One reason she prefers grown-ups is that they tell stories. These details about Estelle Oldham call into question biographers' portrayals of her as a totally dependent lightweight whose greatest concerns were her clothes and her reputation in the community. Her daughter explains, "Ma-ma would try to please people she cared about or for a reason. But she really didn't care about public opinion."<sup>28</sup>

Estelle Faulkner is supposed to have craved a more active social life. Perhaps she did. Yet her daughter says, "She wasn't interested in the activities of the other ladies' clubs and bridge. She loved to fiddle around the garden. She wasn't doing the gardening herself, but she was out there supervising and cutting flowers. I don't think there was ever a problem with boredom as far as Ma-ma was concerned—not at the beginning of her life or at the end either. It was not a question of 'what I am going to do with myself for the next hour because there's nothing I don't have to do.' Time was something she enjoyed."<sup>29</sup> As for Estelle's supposed neediness, again her daughter's comments suggest a kind of self-sufficiency, independence, and strong sense of selfhood that is at odds with current biographical assessments:

She was ready to listen, always wanted to help. But if I didn't come with a specific problem, she was perfectly willing to let me fend for myself. She wasn't intrusive, but also she was very wrapped up in her own self and her own thoughts. I was more important to her than anything else other than Pappy. At the same time, she herself was very important to herself. I realized early—and it probably saved me too—that I was not of primary importance to either one of them. You know, some people tend to forget that there is a "me." They are *always* concerned with other people. But she wasn't. It's probably one of the reasons she and Pappy stayed together.<sup>30</sup>

To a newspaper reporter years after Faulkner's death, in 1962, Estelle remarked, "I have never been bored in my life—lonely, maybe, but never bored."<sup>31</sup> Along with her collaboration in Faulkner's "games," evidence shows that her self-knowledge and self-sufficiency compelled his respect.

Although Rowan Oak may have been fun to visit, living there was complicated. When it became too much, Jill could go to the cabin where,

first, Caroline Barr and, later, other black women who cared for her lived: “It was sometimes a happier place to be. There was no feeling of tension there. It was the difference between sitting under a nice cool shade tree and sitting on top of a volcano.”<sup>32</sup> That dangerous tension their daughter experienced sustained and enlivened the Faulkners’ marriage, a point Summers makes herself: “Ma-ma and Pappy were two very different and difficult people trying to coexist. They walked on tight-wires around each other, and I walked an equally tight wire around the two of them. But I think they both enjoyed it. I think *I* was the only one who felt uncomfortable. . . . There was always the feeling that something was getting ready to happen. I’m trying to think if there was ever any time when life was simply there. There wasn’t. There were always undercurrents and just a feeling of tension. There’s no other way to describe it.”<sup>33</sup> Jill’s description of their marriage sounds eerily similar to her father’s fictional portrayals of obsession and desire, particularly in *Sanctuary* and *Light in August*.

Further elaborating, she contrasts her mother’s two husbands:

Judge Franklin was a delightful man, but pretty pedestrian. He had money, he liked the things that money provided—polo ponies and steeple-chase horses. But, despite all the places he’d been and things he’d done, he was really pretty dull and predictable. I think *that*, as much as anything, caused the problems between them, because Ma-ma didn’t care for the pedestrian aspects of any life. I think that because she enjoyed living, to some degree, in a fantasy world. Because she didn’t like the pedestrian aspects of any life or thing, she completely enjoyed the sort of life she had with Pappy even though it was difficult. I’m not sure Pappy would have stayed married to anyone else. He married an idea; he didn’t marry a person.

Ma-ma was very good and so was Pappy—if something was distasteful or wasn’t quite as it should be, they could simply not see it. I think moving into Rowan Oak to begin with was something of a lark. It was a romantic adventure and both of them liked that. For example if there was no electricity, they’d say “Oh, isn’t candlelight nice.” There is no running water; a bottle of wine on ice is better than water coming out of a tap. That’s what I’m trying to say about their fantasy world. And remember, everyone had help.<sup>34</sup>

To say that the Faulkners’ marriage translated directly into his fiction (that it was an instance—to use his own words—of sublimating the actual to the apocryphal) is simplistic. But their daughter’s observations on why her parents stayed married, despite much talk on both sides of divorce and desertion, give one a sense that it was a stimulating relationship for both partners.<sup>35</sup> In many respects, Faulkner very consciously used the tension and

theater in his marriage for imaginative experimenting. His marriage and love affairs, even his relationship with his daughter, functioned somewhat like his role-playing.

Exploring further the tension she experienced, Jill Summers says, “Mama herself was not a tense, uptight person. I think a lot of people got the impression that she was a little high-strung and tense. I don’t really think she was. I think that the tension that I’m talking about was between her and Pappy, and in a situation where the two of them were involved. But I don’t think that she, herself, was tense. It may, in part, have been a way of their maintaining in their marriage the illusion of unattainability that seemed to have been so important to Pappy.”<sup>36</sup> And, I might add, to Estelle.

If we misread the intentions of the fictions of love and desire that Faulkner and Estelle created in their lives, we risk misreading the fictions of love and desire in Faulkner’s art.

My book is about the family of perhaps our greatest American novelist, the first to come out of the South. The dynamics of family relations in a Jim Crow society fractured by racism and sexism and its enduring legacy of slavery; the problems of culturally sanctioned addiction; the place of the artist in our culture; the difficulties of achieving a clear sense of self in such a world are the issues on which I focus. In many ways Faulkner’s life is a Type for *The American Artist*. Perhaps this is why the myth to which I referred earlier is so compelling. Relinquishing this one-dimensional myth, however, and attending instead to those dimensions it obscured, changes and enlarges our understanding of Faulkner’s tremendous achievement and of the peculiar place of the artist in our culture. To clarify the significance, complexity, and richness of Faulkner’s originary and enduring relations with Caroline, Maud, and Estelle, and suggest their relevance to the crucial concerns of Faulkner’s fiction, releases fresh perceptions of his art.