

I. K. Kudriavtseva

Minsk, Belarus

TEACHING WILLIAM FAULKNER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

William Faulkner was one of the key figures of 20th-century American and world literature, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize. Because of their aesthetic and thematic value, Faulkner's books appear on the syllabus at schools, colleges and universities. Faulkner's great subject was, in his own words, "the human heart in conflict with itself" [1]; his characters are depicted in the moments of confusion over their identities and their positions within the social context. Faulkner's method was to express the universal human longings through the representation of the local – that is, the social hierarchies, cultural traditions and history of the American South where he was born and spent most of his life. And this is precisely what makes teaching Faulkner's texts so challenging. To understand the psychological dilemmas his characters face and the choices they make, students have to be aware of the historical, economic and sociocultural contexts of the writer's and his characters' lives that may be vastly different from their own backgrounds and cultural contexts.

Another difficulty of teaching Faulkner's texts lies in their narrative complexity. Faulkner's style, especially in the books written in the 1920–1940s, was influenced by modernist techniques and assumptions that implied a refusal of traditional literary forms associated with conservative values. Disruptions of chronological order, multiple points of view, shifts in the narrative, elements of the stream-of-consciousness technique in Faulkner's texts demand heightened sensitivity and attentiveness on the part of the reader. For example, one of the features of Faulkner's style is long, complex sentences that contain strings of adjectives or nouns. In fact, in 1983 Faulkner was awarded the title of "Longest sentence in Literature" by Guinness World Records for his 1,288-word sentence in the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* The writer himself had insisted: "I'm trying to say it all in one sentence, between one Cap and one period. I'm still trying to put it all, if possible, on one pinhead" [2, p. 261].

Ineke Bockting, in an essay describing her experience of teaching Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* to English majors in Holland, Norway and France, tells of her trying to find the answer to the question frequently asked by students: why did Faulkner make the book so hard to read? Over the years she has come to this answer: "because he wants to create empathy with his characters. He wants you to be as desperate as they are <...>; he wants you to feel as deserted, as lost as they do" [3, p. 5–6]. Another teacher, Rajini Srikanth, in the essay "Why I, a Woman of Color from India, Enjoy Teaching William Faulkner" tried to figure out an answer to the same question. She came to the conclusion: "Faulkner's apparent disregard for his accessibility stems from the premise from which he writes. His text is an invitation to enter unconditionally into his world. <...> The reader must <...> enter totally the community of which he writes" [4, p. 36–37].

Finally, some Faulkner's books appear quite controversial by modern standards because of his use of sex and violence and racial language. As noted by Philip M. Weinstein, Faulkner is in trouble in the American "academy" "because his work is recurrently offensive (at the representational level) to women and blacks and because it requires (at the formal level) an investment of readerly energies that fewer and fewer (mainly college-trained) readers see reason to provide" [5, p. 19]. Students must have an advanced level of literary competence to distinguish between the ideological positions of the author, of the narrator and of the speaking character. After analysis and discussion they must discover that Faulkner creates a compelling image of a racist patriarchal culture only to problematize its legitimacy. He demonstrates the privileged position the southern white male only to show its limitations.

As seen from these observations, Faulkner's writing resists easy assimilation and interpretation in the context of a literature classroom. That's why Stephen Hahn and Robert W. Hamblin, the editors of the volume "Teaching Faulkner: Approaches and Methods," note: «Concern for the manner and means of teaching Faulkner has recently become a significant emphasis in Faulkner studies» [6, p. 2]. In fact, there is a special digital resource *Teaching Faulkner Newsletter* [7], published by the Center for Faulkner studies at Southeast Missouri State University, where educators share their experiences of teaching Faulkner's texts.

Among the strategies that allow teachers to make Faulkner's texts more accessible to students, the following can be mentioned:

- doing close reading of Faulkner's texts to study their poetics, their genre and style specificity (this works better with Faulkner's short stories);
- using a wide range of critical perspectives (feminist, Marxist, ethnic, ecocritical, Freudian, Jungian etc.) to focus on particular socioeconomic, cultural or psychological aspects of the text with the aim to bridge the gap between the fictional reality and the students' own life experiences;
- comparative studies of Faulkner's texts alongside each other or alongside texts by other writers – to highlight the similarities and differences in aesthetic and thematic concerns of writers who belong to particular literary traditions;
- using films as a way to introduce Faulkner's texts.

William Faulkner's books are included into several literature courses at Belarusian State University of Foreign Languages. Specifically, Faulkner's novel *Light in August* is discussed in the course of "History of English and American Literature" that is offered to the students of the English Faculty and the Interpreters' Faculty. The main strategy that is used to discuss the novel is placing it in the historical and biographical contexts. The discussion (in the form of individual and group presentations) of the setting – the American South in the 1920s – gives the students a better understanding of the power relations described in *Light in August*. Such cultural-historical approach allows them to see the complexity of the novel's central figure, Joe Christmas, whose identity is problematized through his mixed racial origin. Other characters of the novel are also marginalized because they do not fit in very well with the hierarchies and

norms of the segregated patriarchal southern community, and the students' analysis of the physical and the psychological movement of the plot heavily depends on the knowledge of this kind of historical and cultural information.

After that, the students approach Faulkner's text from the point of view of poetics: they discuss the structural elements of the plot, the novel's composition, the system of characters and means of characterization, the narrative method used by the author, the title and its symbolic function etc. Here the students' critical thinking and English language skills are further developed through a number of problem questions and critical opinions for them to comment on, to agree or to disagree. At this point the students can appreciate the universal character of Faulkner's texts and relate them to their own experiences. They are invited to speak on the importance of family relations and of knowing your own roots, taking Faulkner's words about Joe Christmas as a starting point: "He didn't know what he was, and so he <...> deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn't know which he was. That was his tragedy. That to me was the – the tragic, central idea of the story, that he didn't know what he was, and there was no way possible in life for him to find out, which to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in, not to know what he is and to know that he will never know" [8]. Faulkner's belief that "every man <...> is the sum of his past, of his ancestry, and so there's nothing ever ends in that sense" [9] applies not only to the characters of *Light in August*, but to the concepts of personal and collective history and memory in general.

Finally, *Light in August* is analyzed as a modernist text, and the novel's complexity of composition and density of style make perfect sense in the context of modernist experimentation. Students focus on particular episodes from the novel (the seminar plan on *Light in August* contains the most important extracts from the novel in English) to analyze Faulkner's style.

Although *Light in August* usually represents a challenge to students who may be puzzled by its non-linear structure and the complexity of its moral, social and psychological themes, approaching it from three different points – its context, its poetics, and Faulkner's modernist literary techniques – allows the students to see how different types of discourses (racial, gender, psychological, cultural etc.) interact in a literary text to create a complex picture of man and society.

To sum up, in spite of the challenges that Faulkner's texts present in the context of studying foreign literature and language, they can be effectively used to enhance the students' professional and personal development through a careful choice of methodological approaches.

LITERATURE

1. Faulkner, W. Banquet speech / W. Faulkner. – URL: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1949/faulkner/speech/> (date of access: 05.11.2020).
2. Kartiganer, D. M. "He Was Writing" / D. M. Kartiganer // *Faulkner at 100: Retrospect and Prospect* / ed. D. M. Kartiganer, A. J. Abadie. – Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009. – P. 261–263.

3. Bockting, I. Teaching the Unteachable : William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury / I. Bockting // Faulkner at Fifty: Tutors and Tyros / ed. M. Liénard-Yeterian and G. Préher. – Cambridge : Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. – P. 3–17.
4. Srikanth, R. “Why I, a Woman of Color from India, Enjoy Teaching William Faulkner” / R. Srikanth // Teaching Faulkner : Approaches and Methods / ed. S. Hahn, R. W. Hamblin. – Westport, CT : Greenwood Press, 2001. – P. 31–43.
5. Weinstein, Ph. M. “No Longer at Ease Here” : Faulkner in the New Millennium / Ph. M. Weinstein // Teaching Faulkner: Approaches and Methods / ed. S. Hahn, R. W. Hamblin. – Westport, CT : Greenwood Press, 2001. – P. 19–30.
6. Hahn, S. Introduction / S. Hahn, R. W. Hamblin // Teaching Faulkner : Approaches and Methods / ed. S. Hahn, R. W. Hamblin. – Westport, CT : Greenwood Press, 2001. – P. 1–7.
7. Teaching Faulkner Newsletter. – URL: <https://semo.edu/faulkner-studies/teaching-faulkner/> (date of access: 10.10.2021).
8. Faulkner at Virginia : An audioarchive. – URL: https://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio06_1 (date of access: 10.10.2021).
9. Faulkner at Virginia : An audioarchive. – URL: https://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio30_1.html (date of access: 10.10.2021).