

**Sociohistorical and ethical dominants of the motif complex south in early
faulkner's novels**

The South where Faulkner came of age was already a haunted place, since whatever grandeur it once possessed was definitively a thing of the past, destroyed forever in the Civil War though with little resemblance to the rural culture Faulkner limned: an agrarian universe of often poor but always proud whites, with a few decaying genteel families hanging on to power, with loyal blacks playing their long-defined roles as servants and laborers. As historians have pointed out, we cannot understand the attitudes of early-twentieth-century Southern culture unless we realize how much had been wrecked and altered by the collapse of the antebellum system, how much psychic damage was done during Reconstruction. It is not amiss to say (as critics have said) that the South is the only part of the United States to have known military defeat and occupation. Such a perspective helps us to understand the obsession with the past that governs Faulkner's view of both society and psyche. In this he goes profoundly against the grain of many cherished American myths, most notably the dream of an open future and a clean slate, the forward-looking ideal of freedom that still fuels American ideology. Faulkner will gradually elevate this view of an all-powerful past into a grand scheme, as he works out the myth of the South.

Jean-Paul Sartre, writing about *The Sound and the Fury* in 1947, memorably defined Faulkner's distinctive outlook by comparing the novelist's vision to that of a man standing in a moving convertible, looking backward: Such a person will see an ever-growing vista behind him; such a person is structurally unable to see what is in front of him. At the beginning of his career, race relations in the South are simply part of the backdrop of the stories he wants to tell. But, certainly from *Light in August* on, Faulkner increasingly realizes that race is the great fault line of his culture, the condition that he explores ever more painfully and profoundly in the books to come, with the inevitable caveat that he explores them as a white man, indeed as a Southerner.