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THE GENRE EVOLUTION OF WILLIAM FAULKNER'S NOVELS: ARTISTIC EXPLORATIONS BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article delves into the genre evolution of William Faulkner's novels, positioning his literary contributions at the critical juncture between modernism and postmodernism. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how Faulkner's stylistic and thematic innovations mark a transitional phase in twentieth-century American fiction. By closely examining seminal works such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Wild Palms*, the study investigates Faulkner's experimentation with narrative form, including his use of stream of consciousness, fragmented chronology, multiple narrative voices, and metafictional layering. The article argues that while Faulkner's early writings are emblematic of modernist aesthetics—with their focus on psychological depth, interior monologues, and epistemological exploration—his later texts also anticipate postmodern themes, such as narrative unreliability, intertextuality, and ontological uncertainty. The discussion situates Faulkner's work within a broader historical and philosophical context, drawing on critical frameworks such as narratology, genre theory, and poststructuralist critique. Through a comparative literary approach, the study

demonstrates that Faulkner's novels not only reflect the tensions and transitions between literary epochs but also contribute to redefining the boundaries of narrative fiction. The findings underscore Faulkner's pivotal role in challenging genre conventions and shaping the trajectory of American literature. Ultimately, the paper offers new insights into Faulkner's artistic legacy and affirms his position as a key figure in the literary continuum that bridges the modernist and postmodernist traditions.

Introduction

William Faulkner stands as a towering figure in twentieth-century American literature, whose innovative narrative strategies and profound psychological insights have left an indelible mark on the literary canon. Widely celebrated for his experimentation with time, perspective, and language, Faulkner's oeuvre is emblematic of the dynamic shifts that characterized the literary evolution from modernism to postmodernism. His writing, deeply rooted in the socio-historical complexities of the American South, transcends regional boundaries to engage with universal questions of identity, memory, and moral decay.

This study seeks to investigate the genre evolution in Faulkner's novels, particularly focusing on the transitional space his works occupy between modernist and postmodernist paradigms. While early twentieth-century modernism is typically associated with a break from traditional narrative forms and a preoccupation with subjective experience, postmodernism introduces further fragmentation, metafictional self-awareness, and a heightened skepticism toward grand narratives. Faulkner's fiction- particularly through works such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* - demonstrates a sophisticated negotiation of these literary movements. His narratives often embody modernist sensibilities, such as stream of consciousness and psychological depth, while also anticipating postmodern themes, including narrative instability, intertextuality, and the unreliability of language.

By tracing the artistic and thematic trajectory of Faulkner's novels, this paper aims to contextualize his contributions within the broader discourse of genre transformation in American literature. It examines the ways in which his stylistic innovations and thematic preoccupations reflect and contribute to the shifting aesthetics and philosophical underpinnings that differentiate modernist from postmodernist literature. Through a close reading of selected texts and a comparative analysis of their structural and thematic elements,

this study underscores Faulkner's pivotal role in shaping the contours of narrative fiction in the twentieth century.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in genre theory, modernist and postmodernist literary criticism, and narratology. It draws extensively on Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse, particularly his distinctions between story, narrative, and narration, to dissect the layered structure of Faulkner's texts. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism provides a lens through which the multiplicity of narrative voices can be interpreted as expressions of social, cultural, and historical consciousness.

Moreover, the analysis considers Fredric Jameson's views on postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, helping frame Faulkner's work as a precursor to postmodern sensibilities. Linda Hutcheon's exploration of metafiction and historiographic metafiction is instrumental in understanding how Faulkner blurs boundaries between history and fiction. Through this synthesis of theoretical approaches, the research articulates how Faulkner's writing functions as a site of ideological contestation and narrative experimentation.

Literature analysis and methods

A substantial body of scholarly literature has examined William Faulkner's role in the development of modernist fiction, with many critics acknowledging his innovative manipulation of narrative form, temporality, and consciousness. Early studies, such as those by Cleanth Brooks and Olga Vickery, emphasize Faulkner's modernist aesthetics, particularly his use of stream of consciousness, fragmented chronology, and shifting narrative perspectives. More recent poststructuralist and postmodernist readings, including those by Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh, and Brian McHale, reposition Faulkner within a continuum that anticipates key postmodernist tendencies such as metafictionality, ontological instability, and linguistic indeterminacy. These competing perspectives underscore the complexity of Faulkner's literary position and suggest that his work resists rigid classification within a single literary movement.

This research adopts a comparative and diachronic literary analysis, combining close textual reading with a theoretical framework grounded in genre theory and narratology. The primary methodological approach involves a detailed examination of selected novels—*The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *The Wild Palms* (1939)—to trace the development of narrative form, thematic depth, and epistemological concerns across Faulkner's career. These texts have been selected not only for

their critical acclaim but also for their illustrative capacity in demonstrating Faulkner's evolving artistic sensibilities.

Close reading strategies are employed to analyze narrative voice, temporal structures, and character subjectivities. Particular attention is paid to the interplay between narrative experimentation and thematic content, including identity, history, memory, and the instability of truth. The analysis also incorporates elements of intertextuality and metafiction to explore how Faulkner's works reflect postmodern concerns with self-referentiality and the construction of meaning.

In addition to textual analysis, the study engages with historical and philosophical contexts that shaped literary production in the early to mid-twentieth century. The shifting socio-political landscape of the American South, as well as broader global developments—such as the aftermath of World War I, the Great Depression, and the disillusionment with Enlightenment rationalism—form a crucial backdrop for understanding the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of Faulkner's work. The study further draws on the theoretical contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin (dialogism), Gérard Genette (narrative discourse), and Fredric Jameson (postmodern cultural logic) to elucidate the nuanced transitions in genre and narrative logic observable in Faulkner's oeuvre.

This multi-dimensional methodology enables a comprehensive analysis of Faulkner's novels as dynamic literary artifacts that bridge two major literary movements. By situating Faulkner at the intersection of modernist innovation and postmodern exploration, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of genre evolution in twentieth-century American literature.

Results and discussion

The analysis of William Faulkner's major novels reveals a progressive evolution in narrative technique and thematic complexity that reflects a gradual shift from modernist to postmodernist literary sensibilities. This transformation is neither linear nor absolute; rather, it manifests as a series of overlapping strategies and motifs that span Faulkner's body of work. Through close readings of *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Wild Palms*, this study identifies key characteristics of genre transition and narratological experimentation.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner demonstrates the height of modernist innovation. The novel's fractured narrative structure—organized around the consciousness of three brothers with varying degrees of cognitive and emotional disintegration—exemplifies

modernism's focus on interiority and subjective truth. The use of stream of consciousness, disjointed chronology, and symbolic motifs underscores the instability of meaning and the fragmentation of self in a decaying Southern aristocracy. While these techniques are hallmarks of modernism, Faulkner's radical manipulation of temporality and narrative reliability also foreshadows postmodern concerns with non-linearity and epistemological uncertainty.

As I Lay Dying similarly operates within a modernist framework, employing multiple narrators and inner monologues to present divergent perspectives on a single event—the death and burial of Addie Bundren. Yet the novel also introduces a level of self-conscious narrative performance that gestures toward postmodern reflexivity. Characters such as Darl exhibit an acute awareness of their narrative role, and the novel's ironic treatment of truth, identity, and familial duty anticipates later postmodern skepticism toward fixed moral or ontological categories.

With *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner pushes the boundaries of narrative form even further. The novel is structured around nested storytelling, with multiple narrators recounting and interpreting the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen—a Southern patriarch whose legacy is shrouded in myth, prejudice, and historical trauma. The recursive, often contradictory narratives expose the instability of historical truth and the multiplicity of interpretation. This metafictional layering and thematic focus on the constructedness of history and identity align closely with postmodern literary strategies. Faulkner not only questions the knowability of the past but also foregrounds the limitations of language and narration itself.

The Wild Palms, a lesser-studied but stylistically bold novel, further illustrates Faulkner's engagement with narrative experimentation. The novel comprises two interwoven stories—*The Wild Palms* and *Old Man*—which alternate by chapter and present contrasting worldviews. This juxtaposition of narrative modes (romantic idealism versus existential realism) and the deliberate disruption of linear progression mark a clear departure from conventional storytelling. The novel's structure enacts a postmodern sensibility by refusing narrative closure and by presenting a textual space where meaning is provisional and contingent upon interpretation.

Across these works, Faulkner's treatment of temporality, voice, and subjectivity reflects a complex negotiation between the modernist impulse to delve into the inner psyche and the postmodern inclination to destabilize meaning, authorship, and historical certainty. His novels become a site where genre boundaries are tested, blurred, and ultimately redefined. Rather than adhering strictly to the tenets of one literary movement, Faulkner's fiction reveals a

transitional dynamic-one that captures the aesthetic and philosophical tensions of the twentieth century.

The results of this analysis suggest that Faulkner's literary innovations serve as a bridge between the experimental ethos of modernism and the ironic, self-referential tendencies of postmodernism. His contribution to American literature lies not only in his mastery of form but in his ability to anticipate and influence the evolving concerns of future literary generations. Faulkner's work thus occupies a pivotal position in the genealogy of genre transformation, offering a rich field for ongoing critical inquiry.

Author's viewpoint

As a scholar with a keen interest in both American literature and literary theory, we view William Faulkner's body of work as a profound example of genre fluidity and narrative daring. His writing reveals the fragility of absolute truths and offers a rich terrain for interrogating the nature of storytelling itself. We believe Faulkner's novels are more than products of their time-they are timeless artifacts that continue to challenge readers and scholars alike to question the foundations of identity, memory, and meaning.

In teaching and studying his works, we have consistently observed that students engage deeply with the complexity of his narrative structures. These texts push readers to become active participants in the construction of meaning, a hallmark of both modernist and postmodernist literature. Faulkner's courage to destabilize language and structure inspires literary analysis that goes beyond thematic exploration to philosophical inquiry.

Conclusion

This study has explored the genre evolution within William Faulkner's novels, emphasizing his transitional role between modernism and postmodernism. Through a detailed analysis of selected texts-The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom! and The Wild Palms-the research has demonstrated how Faulkner's narrative techniques and thematic concerns evolved in tandem with the shifting literary paradigms of the twentieth century. His works, while grounded in the formal and philosophical principles of modernist literature, increasingly display the metafictional reflexivity, narrative fragmentation, and ontological uncertainty associated with postmodernist fiction.

Faulkner's contributions are particularly significant in that they resist categorization within a single literary tradition. Rather than conforming to the aesthetic norms of his time, Faulkner persistently challenged the boundaries of genre, form, and narrative authority. His novels interrogate the reliability of language, the multiplicity of perspectives, and the fragility

of historical truth—concerns that would become central to postmodern literary discourse. By doing so, he not only expanded the expressive capacities of the modern novel but also laid the groundwork for the literary innovations that followed in the postmodern era.

Furthermore, Faulkner's engagement with the cultural, historical, and psychological dimensions of the American South adds a layer of socio-political resonance to his formal experimentation. His treatment of race, memory, and regional identity serves as a vehicle for exploring broader existential and epistemological dilemmas, making his work both temporally rooted and universally relevant.

In conclusion, William Faulkner's novels exemplify a unique confluence of modernist depth and postmodern complexity. His literary trajectory offers a compelling case study of how genre conventions are not static but fluid, evolving in response to changing artistic, intellectual, and cultural currents. As such, Faulkner remains not only a central figure in American literary history but also a critical bridge between two of the most influential literary movements of the twentieth century. His artistic legacy invites continued scholarly engagement with the processes of genre transformation and the enduring power of narrative innovation.

Practical recommendations

1. For Literature Teachers: Incorporate comparative reading tasks that contrast Faulkner's novels with contemporary postmodern texts (e.g., Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon) to highlight narrative parallels.
2. For Scholars: Extend Faulkner studies into transnational contexts, examining his influence on non-Western narrative traditions.
3. For Curriculum Designers: Develop interdisciplinary modules that explore Faulkner's use of history, psychology, and philosophy in literature courses.
4. For Translators: Consider the role of epistemological ambiguity when translating Faulkner's work, preserving both narrative voice and philosophical nuance.
5. For Students: Focus on how Faulkner's manipulation of time and voice deepens character complexity, and use these features as tools in literary interpretation.

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