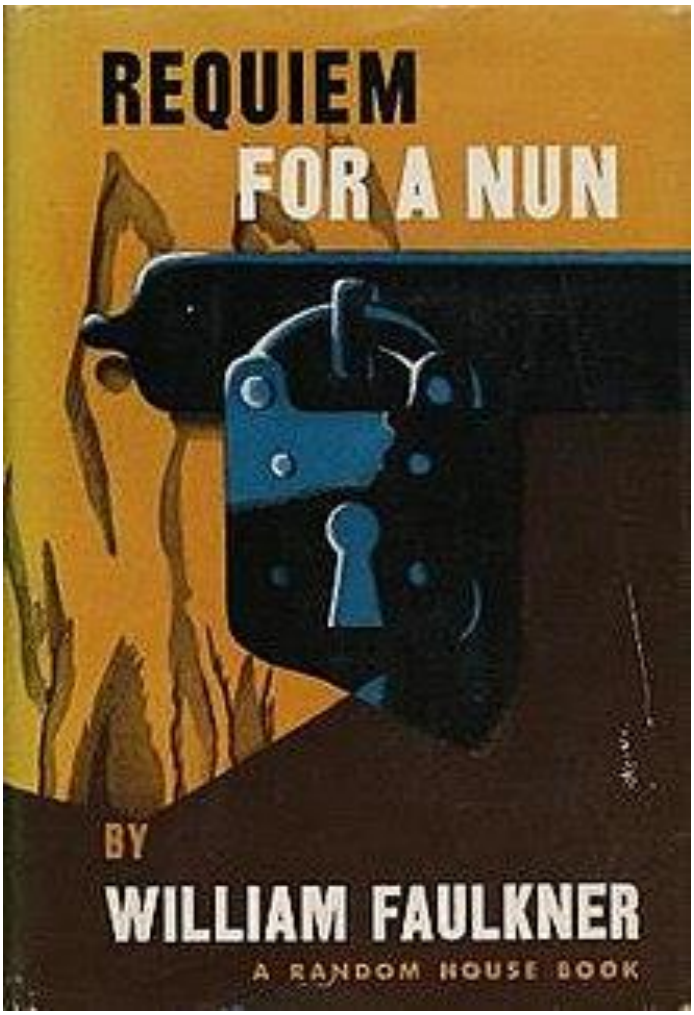
William Faulkner's Requiem For a Nun



Cover Courtesy Wikipedia

Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

William Faulkner, *Requiem For A Nun.*

First Published by Random House in New York in 1951.

First Published in England by Chatto & Windus in 1953.

This reviewer uses the 1960 Penguin Paperback edition.

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Review

On a first reading of *Requiem For A Nun* can easily seem to be pretentious, portentous, almost formless, and erratic, a potpourri of observations, performances, local history, anecdotes, recollections, a court transcript, clemency appeals and jail visits. These prose segments are frequently presented in a stream of consciousness style. Rarely does any other novelist use sentences as long as Faulkner does; then suddenly he gives the opposite, short even terse and often abrasive sentences or dialogue of less than a six words. He seems obsessed with passing time and yet the time here is not chronological, nor does the time flow easily. His narrative and his style seem turbid, eccentric and recondite, coiling back onto earlier events, observations or dialogue, mixing structures from drama, history and fiction. This potpourri raises the first two questions often asked about Faulkner's

work; why write in this way? Is he being deliberately difficult? No and if readers bear with him his reasons become clear.

He loads all this onto a seemingly simple plot. In the Mississippi town of Jefferson in 1950 Nancy Mannigoe, a drug addict, drunkard and sometime prostitute, is employed by the wealthy Temple Drake and her husband Gavin as a nurse and baby sitter for their two children. For the reader this raises the obvious question of why on earth do the Stevens's do this? They do not seem to be employing a poor Black woman due to being guilt ridden liberals or because they owe her a favour.

Other questions soon follow. After murdering their baby Nancy Mannigoe goes on trial, initially pleads guilty and is sentenced to death, calmly agreeing with the sentence. Why? With the execution pending Temple and her Uncle by law and lawyer Gavin Stephens go to Jackson, the state capitol and she pleads for Nancy's life, but in an incoherent, guilt ridden and emotional way that leaves it difficult for the governor to find a reason to pardon Nancy. Why not speak clearly giving factual reasons? In this scene Gavin does not so much plead for Nancy, but is obviously protecting Temple from her own frequently blathering mouth. Why? The obvious answer is that Temple is really the murderer – or at least an accessory, but the factual evidence and Nancy's admittance seemingly go against this. In Faulkner's writings the truth is frequently not obvious, superficial or simple. With such complexities below the surface it cannot be spontaneously or simplistically told,.

Faulkner works on hidden truths: this raises the question of what is the best way to reveal them? Wizardry and Magic? Omniscient detectives? Observers and narrators who somehow know everything? Such things do not work outside fantasy or cheap formulaic detective fiction. Several critics compare hidden truths to icebergs, where four fifths of the truth is unseen, below the waterline. A closer analogy for Faulkner's fiction would be a lava field, where below the dark, almost settled surface red molten lava seethes and moves, ensuring that on the surface nothing is ever stable, even if it seems to be, Stability is an

illusion, even if movement and therefore change seems non-existent, the seething pressures are building up or slowing, leading to some effect; cooling as a society decays or exploding as Faulkner depicts the upheaval and subsequent destruction in the Civil War. Just as lava will sometimes be visible through cracks that develop by this bubbling or movement, so hidden truths will be quietly revealed in Faulkner's dialogue. Just as a small section of lava will sometimes bubble up to the surface or a squirt will pop, so do small crimes such as Nancy's emerge on the respectable surface of society, suggesting what lies below the surface. Faulkner uses drama, dialogue and some description to create the surface appearance, but he usually uses those qualities to hint at what lies below, ready to erupt and overwhelm, His long prose descriptions outside the dramatic scenes do describe what is hidden, the seething or cooling elemental forces and their effects on motivations, both conscious and unconscious.

This analogy does not apply to all of his works, but does apply very strongly to *Requiem For A Nun.* Faulkner depicts the unfolding story of Nancy, the Stevens Family and the governor in staged drama while interposing them with the histories of three buildings; in order these are Jefferson's courthouse, Jackson's capitol and Jefferson's jail.

The three dramatic scenes work with the surface analogy where the dialogue and carefully described body language give us the cracked volcanic surface, albeit with hints of what lies below. In the three prose sections we see the forces at work below the surface which create the motivations that lead to the Stevens tragedy. In the segment concerning Jackson Faulkner begins with a description that justifies the volcanic analogy, he goes back to the geographic formation of the landscape which Jackson would be built on. He then describes nature's pressures leading to geographic change before the arrival of white men become another force for change. With the courthouse segment, Faulkner moves somewhat faster, starting as late as the last of the eighteenth century, when what becomes Jefferson was a white man's trading post. His pioneers there have a passion for imposing order on the wilderness, shown in their nomenclatural obsessions and

even more so for their desire for a courthouse and a jail, before the town does not even exist yet, just being a tavern near a trading post. This behaviour becomes not only pretentious, but ridiculous as the pioneers go to obsessive lengths to import a fifteen pound padlock for the town's trunk which contains their title deeds, slave schedules and assorted laws and ordinances. The obsession with the useless padlock and the fuss, intrigues and desires enumerating concerning it are only the beginning of revelations about the false nature of law and civilization. Eventually to secure the trunk they build an absurd, misplaced courthouse. The edifice with its white porticoes is an imitation of an English imitation of a Roman imitation of a Greek temple. As in this example Faulkner can frequently find wry humour when people create pretentious fakery to pose as order. The nondescript jail reverses the grandiose courthouse in appearance, but matches it in falsity. Initially the pioneers built it of logs until a briefly imprisoned gang of highwaymen quickly remove a wall the way children demolish a cubby house. Then to build it properly, the courthouse and the town a kidnapped French architect who once worked at Versailles. He teaches the locals how to make bricks – and ends up incarcerated, his punishment for helping build civilization and serving those who want it – and get what they want by violating the law.

In *Requiem For A Nun* human attempts to establish order lead to ironic disorder and suffering. It is not the outlaws, attacking Indians or the ferocious forest bears and panthers that devastate the land, destroying the forest and pushing themselves and other creatures into the swamps, but the peaceable planters who bring in the so soft to touch ephemeral cotton which gently floats on the air. The Confederate call to preserve their society and uphold what they see as the natural order begins the war which destroys their way of life and devastates their homes and the cotton fields which sustained their wealth. When returning World War Two veterans put up a trophy next to a to Confederate memorial they are seemingly trying to perpetuate a heroic tradition and show the victory of order, but they

also seem absurd and their actions ironic. Their trophy is placed in a Mississippi town, but has nothing to do with order there. It is a German howitzer captured in an African desert by a regiment of Japanese Americans who have parents interned in California. Cause, order and loyalties are ironically jumbled, not linked.

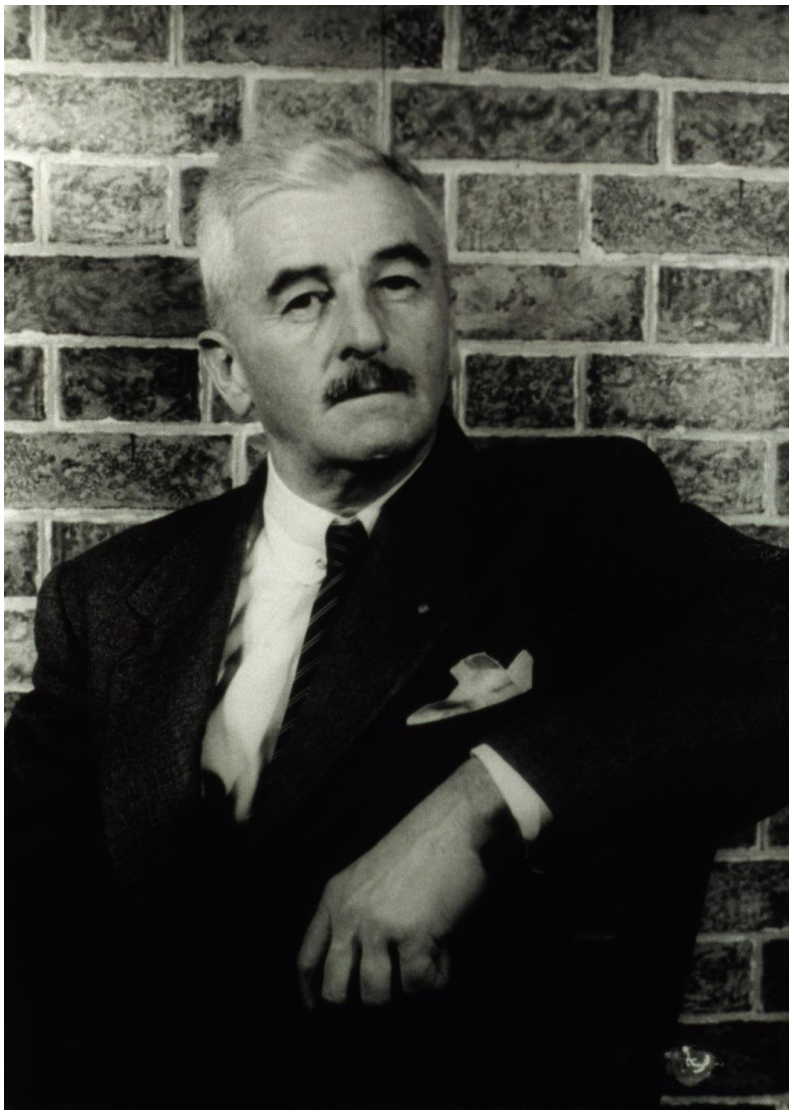
All this seems a long way from the 1950 Stevens tragedy, but Nancy's trial happens in that courthouse and serves her imprisonment in that jail. Faulkner is making more than those connections clear. As Temple says in one of American literature's most quoted comments, the past is not dead, it is not even past.

By showing their local origins in the pioneering days he shows how local law and civilization developed and that they continue to function as an edifice, continuing through illegality to serve the self-interest of the powerful and conniving. The flaws and failings in the human character, the illegality, even their savagery have not progressed beyond their origins with the pioneers. Nancy's experiences show this. Despised by people who lack her honesty, she will be executed in the latest civilized manner by electrocution for killing a baby and yet nobody was even investigated, let alone prosecuted for killing her unborn child when they kicked her in the stomach. This act entwines with others to influence the events affecting what happens to the Stevens family in 1949 and 1950. As so often in Faulkner's stories a seemingly slight, harmless event snowballs into a tragedy years later. Towards the conclusion Temple asks Nancy how could God make both Nancy's approaching execution and the killing of her baby a consequence of her act of getting on a train to go to a basketball game five years before. Here she pus into words another question readers surely asked earlier.

Much of what characters do in this story suggests that people are little more than clever animals - and yet there are moments that suggest otherwise. Compassion, empathy and forgiveness are evident among several of the novels characters. We read of Temple's anguish, her uncle's desire to protect and console her and from the strongest character, Nancy's stoic acceptance of her approaching death. She

expects no justice on earth, but calmly looks forward to heaven and she inspires others. When at night Nancy sings church hymns in jail, others join, so many do that the church is losing its choral strength.

In his December 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech Faulkner did not play down the problems facing humanity and the problems for writers describing life. He urged younger writers to never downplay the problems, but to write with the eternal truths, love and pity, pride and honour, compassion and sacrifice.



William Faulkner 1897-1962

Photographed by Carl Van Vechten in 1954