

# A Study of Artistic Creation in William Faulkner's *Mosquitoes* (Part I)

by  
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## Abstract

In his second novel *Mosquitoes* published in 1927, William Faulkner presents various scenes of lengthy arguments about the interaction between the artist and his creation. Gordon, a sculptor, and Dawson Fairchild, a novelist, are two of the most important characters in the novel and the validity of their conception of art is thoroughly examined. However, as Faulkner's view on art and literature are not fully represented by any character but emerge dialogically from the novel's conversations and action, the characters other than these two artists also play a very important role in *Mosquitoes*. The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize these two artists' conception of artistic creation and probe into Faulkner's views of the artist's relation to his art.

Key Words: artist, artistic creation, art and life, genius, ideal woman

## 1

William Faulkner, in his second novel *Mosquitoes* published in 1927, introduced various notions of artistic creation. In the novel, Mrs. Maurier, a wealthy widow who fancies herself as a patroness of the New Orleans French Quarter artists, invites a group of local artists—and non-artists as well—to a yacht cruise on Lake Pontchartrain. The group includes a novelist, two poets, a sculptor, a painter, a literary critic, and others who are not artists. Among these artists, on the sumptuous yacht, there occur lengthy discussions of various topics on the artist's relation to his work, and though the discussions are carried on mostly by Dawson Fairchild, a middle-aged novelist considered to represent Sherwood Anderson, and Julius Kauffman (always referred to

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as “the Semitic man”), a character based on Julius Weis Friend, editor of *Double Dealer*, Faulkner pursued the theme of Art and Life, the main theme of the novel, on the main through the characters of the two major artists, Gordon, a sculptor, and Dawson Fairchild.

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the two artists’ conception of artistic creation, which is sharply contrasted, and to probe into Faulkner’s views of the artist’s relation to his art.

## 2

Julius Kauffman, an erudite man with a deep knowledge of literature, plays an important role as a literary critic in the novel. He points out the difference of the two artists, Gordon and Fairchild, as follows: “You [Fairchild] are an artist only when you are telling about people, while Gordon is not an artist only when he is cutting at a piece of wood or stone.” (51)<sup>1</sup> In fact, Fairchild seems to prefer talking about art rather than creating it, whereas Gordon is a dedicated artist always working on his sculpture with “the thin fretful flashing of the chisel beneath the rhythmic maul.” (9)

In 1956 Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel interviewed William Faulkner in New York, and asked him about a formula to follow in order to be a good novelist. To this Faulkner answered, “99% talent ...99% discipline...99% work.”<sup>2</sup> Though a sculptor, Gordon seems to fit into that formula. That probably is why Mrs. Maurier adores Gordon as a real artist and calls him a genius: “a real studio ...where *a real artist* works” (23); “*a real sculptor*, one from whom we expect great things”(23); “to see how *genius* looks at home” (21); “So this is where *genius* labors.” (22) (Italics mine)

## 3

Gordon’s first masterpiece is described by the author as “motionless and passionately eternal—the virginal breastless torso of a girl, headless, armless, legless, in marble temporarily caught and hushed yet passionate still for escape, passionate and simple and eternal in the equivocal derisive darkness of the world. Nothing to trouble your youth or lack of it...” (11) Gordon’s remark on his stature is basically the same as the author’s: “This is my feminine ideal: a virgin with no legs to leave me, no arms to hold me, no head to talk to me.” (26)

From these passages, we can clearly know the aim of Gordon’s artistic creation. He is trying to immortalize an ideal woman with her beauty and youth in his sculpture. His marble torso of a girl represents, as Daniel J. Singal points out, pure sexuality—impregnable virginity—captured

in a form that its creator can possess forever (“no legs to leave me”), the instant of splendid and timeless beauty made permanent.<sup>3</sup> The fact that this statue has “no arms to hold me, no head to talk to me” reflects Gordon’s reluctance to establish an equal relationship even with the image of his ideal woman. His absolute dominance over the virgin caught in marble has to be maintained.

His sculpture’s perfect form, notes André Bleikasten, has been obtained through a process of subtraction and abstraction—that is, through a deliberate denial or, at least, diminishment of life—and, more specifically, through a willful cancellation of sex, the transformation through mutilation of a female body into a fascinating fetish.<sup>4</sup> Without doubt, this wish stems from his romantic impulse to sever art from life.<sup>5</sup>

4

When Mrs. Maurier and her teenaged niece Patricia Robyn visit Gordon’s studio, Patricia is charmed by his marble torso because she has noticed that the statue resembles her. Her persistent attempt to make him sell his statue to her, however, fails. Gordon flatly refuses her offers, no matter what the price. At first, Patricia fails to comprehend the reason of his refusal, but after Gordon tells her how Cyrano in Edmond Rostand’s novel had “locked up” the girl he loved in a book, she finally understands the reason why.

“...He had her locked up. In a book.”

“In a book?” she repeated. Then she comprehended. “Oh. ... That’s what you’ve done, isn’t it? With that marble girl without any arms and legs you made? Hadn’t you rather have a live one? Say, you haven’t got any sweetheart or anything, have you?”

“No,” he answered. “How did you know?”

“You look so bad. Shabby. But that’s the reason: no woman is going to waste time on a man that’s satisfied with a piece of wood or something. You ought to get out of yourself. You’ll either bust all of a sudden some day, or just dry up....” (270)

Patricia here is critical of Gordon because she has seen that he can’t love a real girl. Without knowing what she is doing, she points out the kernel of the deficiency in Gordon’s art—it is severed from life. His aloofness and arrogance, described repeatedly as such in the novel, may be a sign of the deficiency of his artistic creation: “the *icy* blueness of his eyes” (24); “Gordon’s

hawk's face brooded above them, *remote* and insufferable with *arrogance*." (27); "Gordon loomed above the two shorter men, staring down at them, *remote* and *arrogant*." (49); Patricia "met his harsh *arrogant* stare calmly...." (70); "Gordon leaned his back against the wall, tall and shabby and *arrogant*." (71); "*arrogant loneliness* of his heart" (72); "Gordon *aloof* and insufferably *arrogant*" (104); "*haughty* and *inhuman* almost" (152); "his *arrogant* uncomfortable stare." (153) (Italics mine)

5

After meeting Patricia, despite her bitter criticism of him, Gordon is enchanted by her and decides to join the cruise, although he once flatly refused Mrs. Maurier's invitation to do so. On the yacht, Gordon spends most of his time with Patricia. His infatuation with her, a living, breathing woman, is probably because she is an "epicene," showing virginal innocence with her flat breasts and boyish body. It is symbolic that he shows no interest in Jenny Steinbauer, a feminine teenage girl, who attracts the sexual interest of most of the men on the yacht. Eva Wiseman, a poet, admonishes Jenny not to parade herself in front of the men: "Darling, you simply must not go where men can see you, like that. For Mrs. Maurier's sake, you know; she's having enough trouble as it is, without any rioting." (203) Gordon's ideal woman is not like Jenny; his ideal woman has to be sexless.

However, his fascination with Patricia as a girl of flesh and blood never surpasses his artistic impulse to make a statue of her, so much so that when Gordon touched her, "he moved his hand over her face, slowly and firmly, but lightly" (272) and his hand "moved slowly along her cheekbone and jaw, pausing, tracing a muscle, moving on." (272) Patricia at first does not realize what he is driving at:

"Say," she said curiously, no longer alarmed, "what are you doing that for?"

"Learning your face."

"Learning my face? Are you going to make me in marble?" she asked quickly, raising herself. "Can you do a marble of my head?"

"Yes." (272)

Later when Gordon decides to make a statue of Mrs. Maurier, instead of Patricia, his attitude

toward his models becomes very clear: He treats Mrs. Maurier only as a material useful for his creation, that is, a means to an end, and never treats her with the respect he should show her as a human being:

...he faced the old woman again, putting his hand on her and turning her face upward into the moonlight. ... His hand moved over her face, learning the bones of her forehead and eyesockets and nose through her flesh.

"There's something in your face, something behind all this silliness," he went on in his cold level voice while an interval of frozen time refused to pass. His hand pinched the loose sag of flesh around her mouth, slid along the fading line of her cheek and jaw. "I suppose you've had what you call your sorrows, too, haven't you?" (153-4)

During his examination of her head, Mrs. Maurier is seized with "utter fear" (154) and almost faints. This fearful experience convinces her how inhuman the sculptor Gordon is, and her former admiration of him disappears entirely.

## 6

After the cruise, Gordon makes a statue of Mrs. Maurier not out of marble, but out of clay, and Fairchild and Julius, seeing this statue, becomes momentarily speechless. To them the statue shows the "darkness" hidden in the very depths of her being: "...there was something else—something that exposed her face for the mask it was, and still more, a mask unaware." (322) It is no wonder that Fairchild laments his inability as an artist, commenting as he does that "I've known her for a year, and Gordon comes along after four days ... Well, I'll be damned." (322)

As to the "darkness" shown in the statue, the reader is asked to recall what Patricia asked and then remarked to Gordon when they first met: "Why are you so black?" (25); "Not your hair and beard. ... But you. You are black. ... I don't know what that is." (25) Neither did Gordon know what it meant at the time. But now it has become clear to the reader what it means. His "blackness" is a sign of his artistic power of looking inward to the very depths of a person's being.

Obviously, Gordon's approach to art has changed. Instead of seeking timeless beauty, or seeing art as an end in itself, Gordon tries to reach the depth of a live woman's being, and thus reveal her inner psyche. André Bleikasten explains the two ways of Gordon's approach to art as

follows: "While the virginal torso embodied a private dream of sexless beauty and timeless youth, the mask reveals the humble and poignant truth of a human face; the former sprang from the romantic impulse to dissociate art from life, the latter from the wish to relate it back to life."<sup>6</sup>

7

Gordon's change in his approach to artistic creation, however, does not lead to filling or bridging the gap between art and life. For him, an ideal woman has to be, as ever, a virgin. However, he cannot be satisfied with his ideal woman sexually even though his sexual impulse calls for its fulfillment. And this is the conclusion of Fairchild and Julius as they watch Gordon go into a brothel and "lift a woman from the shadow and raise her against the mad stars, smothering her squeal against his tall kiss." (339)

This prostitute, Cleanth Brooks notes, is, of course, not virginal and seems in the least epicene. Faulkner here seems bent on urging the contrast between the kind of woman that Gordon actually embraces and the woman who represents his ideal love.<sup>7</sup> Gordon fails to combine his artistic creation with his life, so that he has given up trying to find his ideal woman anywhere other than in his works of art. He associates only with prostitutes, and in the scene mentioned above there are no emotional ties between Gordon and the prostitute.<sup>8</sup> Seeing Gordon enter the brothel, Julius says, "Dante invented Beatrice, creating himself a maid that life had not had time to create, and laid upon her frail and unbowed shoulders the whole burden of man's history of his impossible heart's desire." (339) Like Dante's Beatrice, Gordon's ideal woman is one that he has created for himself.<sup>9</sup> Faulkner is obviously critical of Gordon, who fails to unify art with life.

8

Dawson Fairchild, unlike Gordon, is not regarded as a true artist in the novel. In various discussions by the several artists who have joined the yacht cruise, Fairchild is practically always the target of severe criticism, and Julius Kauffman is the one the most critical of him.

When Fairchild, speaking of the solitary life led by Gordon, comments that he "ought to get out of himself more.... You can't be an artist all the time. You'll go crazy," (51) Julius retorts sharply, "But then, you are not an artist." (51) This must be Faulkner's judgment as well. To Faulkner, as Daniel J. Singal points out, the artist's life is one of controlled insanity, and nothing less would permit genius to flourish.<sup>10</sup>

9

The criticisms of Fairchild's approach to his art, presented in the novel, are manifold.

First of all, though a novelist, Fairchild lacks faith in words. When Mr. Talliaferro, an admirer of Fairchild as his mentor, is trying desperately to seduce Jenny, a teenage girl he loves, Fairchild advises him to be bold with women: "I don't mean with words. They don't care anything about words except as little things to pass the time with. You can't be bold with them with words: you can't even shock them with words. Though the reason may be that half the time they are not listening to you. They ain't interested in what you're going to say: they are interested in what you're going to do." (112)

Hearing Fairchild's views of words, Julius criticizes him for his ignorance of their important function: "...you are a funny sort to disparage words; you, a member of that species all of whose actions are controlled by words. It's the word that overturns thrones and political parties and instigates vice crusades, not things: the Thing is merely the symbol for the Word. And more than that, think what a devil of a fix you and I'd be in were it not for words, were we to lose our faith in words." (130)

However, Fairchild's following comment prove that he recognizes one of the harmful functions of words; that is, words often become the substitution for "things and deeds"; "You begin to substitute words for things and deeds, like the withered cuckold husband that took the Decameron to bed with him every night, and pretty soon the thing or the deed becomes just a kind of shadow of a certain sound you make by shaping your mouth a certain way." (210)

None the less, on the whole, Fairchild's understanding of the function of words is rather shallow. His optimism at creating a good literary work with a good combination of words, demonstrated in the following speech, obviously reflects his superficial understanding of the technique of his craft as a novelist: "I don't claim that words have life in themselves. But words brought into a happy conjunction produce something that lives, just as soil and climate and an acorn in proper conjunction will produce a tree. Words are like acorns, you know. Every one of 'em won't make a tree, but if you just have enough of 'em, you're bound to get a tree sooner or later." (210) Julius' bitter criticism of this interpretation of Fairchild's hits the mark: "If you just talk long enough, you're bound to say the right thing some day. Is that what you mean? (210) Julius also ridicules Fairchild for his "unshakable faith in words." (319) Faulkner here suggests that Fairchild lacks what is required for a true artist: fierce discipline as a novelist.

## 10

Secondly, the localism of his literature is in question. Fairchild believes the importance of provincialism, insisting, “You can’t grow corn without something to plant it in.” (183) Eva Wiseman, Julius’ sister, counters, “But you don’t plant corn in geography: you plant it in soil. It not only does not matter where that soil is, you can even move the soil from one place to another—around the world, if you like—and it will still grow corn.” (183) Julius shares his sister’s view: “Life everywhere is the same, you know. Manners of living it may be different—are they not different between adjoining villages? family names, profits on a single field or orchard, work influences—but man’s old compulsions, duty and inclination: the axis and the circumference of his squirrel cage, they do not change.” (243) Here both Eva and Julius advocate the importance of the universal truth in literature, though this doesn’t mean localism is of no importance. Quite the opposite. The point is that local color in literature needs to contain a universal truth. Or, to put it in another way, a writer needs to integrate the local and the universal. Faulkner himself expresses localism and the universal truth in literature as follows: “I think that local color is part of the environment and no part of the environment can be more or less important than any universal truth.”<sup>11</sup>

## 11

Thirdly, concerning Fairchild’s characterization in his novels, criticism of it is made not by Julius or other artists, but by the author. In fact, in their conversation on the difference between characters in fiction and in life, they agree that a character in fiction doesn’t necessarily reflect a person in life. Fairchild says, “if you forced characters in a book to eat as much grapefruit as we do, both the art boys and the humanitarians would stand on their hind legs and howl. But in real life— In life, anything might happen; in actual life people will do anything. It’s only in books that people must function according to arbitrary rules of conduct and probability; it’s only in books that events must never flout credulity.” (181) Eva agrees with him: “People’s characters, when writers delineate them by revealing their likings and dislikings, always appear so perfect, so inevitably consistent...” (181) Julius joins the discussion, insisting, “A character in a book must be consistent in all things, while man is consistent in one thing only: he is consistently vain.” (182)

However, Faulkner presents this discussion as a sign of Fairchild’s misconception of the role of literature—Fairchild believes in the separation of art and life. Fairchild’s following questionable

comment on characterization in his novels is not at all acceptable to Faulkner: "love, youth, sorrow and hope and despair—they were nothing at all to me until I found later some need of a particular reaction to put in the mouth of some character of whom I wasn't at that time certain, and that I don't yet consider very admirable." (320)

12

Fourthly, as for his purpose of writing literature, Fairchild holds that "every word a writing man writes is put down with the ultimate intention of impressing some woman." (250) To this idea, Julius agrees. But this must be Faulkner directing criticism at himself, because just like Fairchild's comment, Faulkner wrote this novel *Mosquitoes* to impress Helen Baird he was madly in love with at the time. (In fact, this novel was dedicated to her.)

Fifthly, criticism is made of his lack of ideal as is seen in the following passage: "As soon as a man begins to join clubs and lodges, his spiritual fiber begins to disintegrate. When you are young, you join things because they profess high ideals. You believe in ideals at that age, you know. Which is all right, as long as you just believe in them as ideals and not as criterions of conduct. But after a while you join more things, you are getting older and more sedate and sensible; and believing in ideals is too much trouble so you begin to live up to them with your outward life, in your contacts with other people. And when you've made a form of behavior out of an ideal, it's not an ideal any longer, and you become a public nuisance." (38-9) Fairchild gives the above as advice to young men, but this passage reveals his lack of ideal.

Finally, his optimistic view of life is a proof that he has no depth in his understanding of life. A severe criticism of this deficiency of Fairchild's view of life comes from Julius: "His writing seems fumbling, not because life is unclear to him, but because of his innate humorless belief that, though it bewilder him at times, life at bottom is sound and admirable and fine...." (242)

13

Aside from these criticisms, there are other criticisms directed toward Fairchild, but his view of genius in artistic creation, as is seen in the passage below, is convincing, and this view seems to be the author's, too: "That's what it is. Genius. ... People confuse it so, you see. They have got it now to where it signifies only an active state of the mind in which a picture is painted or a poem is written. When it is not that at all. It is that Passion Week of the heart, that instant of timeless

beatitude which some never know, which some, I suppose, gain at will, which others gain through an outside agency like alcohol, like to-night—that passive state of the heart with which the mind, the brain, has nothing to do at all, in which the hackneyed accidents which make up this world—love and life and death and sex and sorrow—brought together by chance in perfect proportions, take on a kind of splendid and timeless beauty.” (339) However, despite this deep insight into the secret of artistic creation, this is what Fairchild considered to be true many years ago as a young novelist, and he does not believe in it any more.

So, Fairchild, throughout the novel, is a target of criticism by the author. The main purpose of this criticism, however, is not to degrade Fairchild (or Sherwood Anderson), but Faulkner’s sincere attempt to remind himself, as a young novelist, of not committing the same errors Fairchild does.

#### 14

As a young artist, William Faulkner examined the nature of art and the role of the artist in *Mosquitoes* mainly through Gordon and Fairchild. Although many critics have argued that this is his weakest novel, Faulkner’s probe into the essence of artistic creation in this novel seems rather successful. In this respect, writing *Mosquitoes* was of great importance to Faulkner in his career as a novelist.

#### Notes

1. William Faulkner. *Mosquitoes*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1997. All subsequent references to this novel are from this edition.
2. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds. *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner (1926–1962)*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. 238.
3. Daniel J. Singal. *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997. 89.
4. André Bleikasten. *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner’s Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. 26.
5. *Ibid.*, 27.
6. Bleikasten. *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976. 30.
7. Cleanth Brooks. *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. 136.

8. *Ibid.*, 138.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Singal, 85–6.
11. Meriwether, 203.

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