

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

by  
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### Abstract

In his second novel *Mosquitoes* published in 1927, William Faulkner presents 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. The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the notion of artistic creation of various characters who have joined Mrs. Maurier's yacht cruise.

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

### 1

William Faulkner, in his second novel *Mosquitoes* published in 1927, presents various scenes of lengthy arguments about the interaction between an artist and his creation. True, 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, but as Faulkner's views on art and literature are not fully represented by any character but emerge dialogically from the novel's conversations and action,<sup>1</sup> the characters other than these two artists also play very important roles in *Mosquitoes*.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine various characters, other than Gordon and Fairchild, who have joined Mrs. Maurier's yacht cruise, and to see how they evaluate these two artists' conception of artistic creation.

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Mrs. Maurier, a wealthy widow and patroness of the arts, invites New Orleans' various artists aboard her sumptuous yacht for a cruise on Lake Pontchartrain. One novelist, two poets, one sculptor and others join the cruise.

Her love for art is apparent from her first appearance in the novel. "...I have just found the most wonderful thing! Do look at it, Mr. Talliaferro: I do so want your opinion.' She extended to him a dull lead plaque from which in dim bas-relief of faded red and blue shimmered a Madonna with an expression of infantile astonishment identical with that of Mrs. Maurier...." (17)<sup>2</sup>

In this scene she mistakes an object Talliaferro is carrying for a piece of art he has created, and discovering her mistake, she cries out; "Ah, Mr. Talliaferro, I am dreadfully disappointed. I had hoped for a moment that some of your artist friends had at last prevailed on you to give something to the world of Art." (18) Here, we can clearly see that she adores art and artists.

Mrs. Maurier worships the sculptor Gordon, calling him a "genius." She takes her niece Patricia Robyn to his studio to show "how genius looks at home." (21) When she meets Gordon in his studio, she exclaims with a great excitement, "So this is where genius labors." (22)

She is fully aware that she has no talent for art and feels envious of these artists: "Ah, Mr. Talliaferro, why were you and I given a love for the beautiful, yet denied the ability to create it from stone and wood and clay...." (23) She is envious of Gordon, saying, "So few of us take time to look inward and contemplate ourselves, don't you think? It's the life we lead, I suppose. Only he who creates has not lost the art of this: of making his life complete by living within himself. Don't you think so, Mr. Gordon?" (152) "Mr. Gordon," she continues, "how lucky you who create are.... To know that one had given her mite to Art, no matter how humble the mite or the giver. . . The humble laborer, Mr. Gordon: she, too, has her place in the scheme of things; she, too, has given something to the world, has walked where gods have trod. And I do so hope that you will find on this voyage something to compensate you for having been taken away from your Work." (153) Although her conception of the role of the artists is not necessarily Faulkner's, we understand from her opinions on art how much she adores art and artists.

However, after spending time with these artists aboard the sumptuous yacht *Nausikaa*, her respect for them, especially for Fairchild, has disappeared. She found out that as a human being they are rather inferior: "It's being an artist, Mrs. Maurier said to herself with helpless despondence." (91); "It's that terrible Mr. Fairchild, she told herself. But who could have known

that a middleaged man, and a successful novelist, could or would conduct himself so?" (92); "It's being an artist, she told herself again, helplessly." (95)

Her disillusion with Gordon is very strong, and the following scene reveals that her respect for him has turned into fear:

...he [Gordon] faced the old woman again, putting his hand on her and turning her face upward into the moonlight. Mrs. Maurier knew utter fear. Not fright, fear: a passive and tragic condition like a dream. . . .

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said harshly, staring at her face as a surgeon might. "Tell me about her [Patricia]," he commanded. "Why aren't you her mother, so you could tell me how conceiving her must have been, how carrying her in your loins must have been?"

Mr. Gordon! she implored through her dry lips, without making a sound. His hand moved over her face, learning the bones of her forehead and eyesockets and nose through her flesh. (153-4)

This scene betrays Gordon's cruel nature, cruel because he sees Mrs. Maurier only as a means to creating his sculpture, and not as a human being. Her fear of him stems from his inhumane treatment of her. No wonder she laments of artists, saying, "These terrible men.... These artists!" (155), and when asked by one of the participants of the cruise as "Gordon, too?", she snaps, "Gordon, too." (155)

In this way the four-day cruise comes to an end, giving Mrs. Maurier an irrevocable distrust in artists.

### 3

Ernest Talliaferro, a thirty-year-old widower, admires artists just like Mrs. Maurier. He often visited Gordon's studio even though wherever he was there, "he invariably soiled his clothes, but under that spell put on us by those we admire doing things we ourselves cannot do, he always returned." (10) When Mrs. Maurier unexpectedly encounters him on the street, she says to him, "[Y]ou have been calling on some of your artist friends, I suppose?" (16) She also tells her niece Patricia that "Mr. Talliaferro knows all the interesting people in the Quarter, darling. All the people who are—who are creating—creating things. Beautiful things. Beauty, you know." (16)

As a sign of his lack of artistic talent, “solitude, particularly dingy solitude, was unbearable” (12) to him. Talliaferro knows that he is not cut out for an artist and that is why he becomes furious when Mrs. Maurier sarcastically asks him if he has turned artist: “An artist? You flatter me, dear lady. I’m afraid my soul does not aspire so high.” (18) Mrs. Maurier, as quoted before, laments, “Ah, Mr. Talliaferro, why were you and I given a love for the beautiful, yet denied the ability to create it from stone and wood and clay....” (23)

Talliaferro is infatuated with Jenny, a teenage girl he met on the yacht. He seeks advice on the arts of seduction from the novelist Fairchild, because he believes that artists are more knowledgeable and experienced about women than ordinary people. He pleads to the novelist, “I want your candid opinion. I have more faith in your judgment of people than any one I know.” (98) Fairchild’s advice to him is as follows: “The trouble with you, Talliaferro, is that you ain’t bold enough with women. That’s your trouble.” (112) “They ain’t interested in what you’re going to say,” he continues, “they are interested in what you’re going to do.” (112) Talliaferro follows Fairchild’s advice, but fails in his seduction of Jenny.

Fairchild once mentioned that Talliaferro “labors under the illusion that art is just a valid camouflage for rutting.” (71) From this it seems quite natural that Talliaferro admires artists, because he confesses in the very first sentence of the novel that the “sex instinct...is quite strong in me.” (9) He must have thought that artists were experts in sex, so that his association with artists would make him a good seducer of women. He obviously sees art as a means to this end. But after losing Jenny, he finally comes to realize that artists don’t necessarily have a good knowledge about women or sex. His disillusion with artists grows stronger, just like Mrs. Maurier’s, though for different reasons.

4

Patricia Robyn, aged eighteen, knows nothing about art, nor does she have any interest in art. Miss Jameson, an unsuccessful painter, observes that Patricia has “no interest whatever in the function of creating art” (104) and thinks “I’ll bet she doesn’t even read.” (104) Fairchild also says that Patricia “ain’t an artist at all.” (220) Her enchantment with Gordon’s statue is simply because it resembles her, and not because she finds excellence in it as a work of art.

Her ignorance of art and artists, however, gives her a very important role in the novel. Due to their worship of artists, Mrs. Maurier and Talliaferro fail at first to notice the flaws of these

artists. On the other hand, Patricia notices their flaws immediately. When Mrs. Maurier accuses Patricia of her rudeness to Gordon, she counters, "Nonsense. It'll do him good. He thinks just a little too well of himself as it is." (29) It is Patricia, not her aunt, who understands Gordon's character. When he disappears from the yacht, Mrs. Maurier panics, thinking he might have committed suicide. Patricia admonishes her: "Don't be a fool, Aunt Pat.... What would he want to get drowned for?" (254) We later know that Patricia was right. Gordon has come back.

She can see the deficiencies in Gordon's art as well. Hearing the story of *Cyrano* from Gordon, Patricia knows what his conception of art is:

"...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. . . . How old are you?"

"Thirty-six," he told her. She said:

"Gabriel's pants. Thirty-six year old, and living in a hole with a piece of rock, like a dog with a dry bone. Gabriel's pants. Why don't you get rid of it?" (270)

On the other hand, her ignorance of art is somewhat responsible for her derogatory treatment of it. Patricia believes that everything has its price, and a work of art is no exception, so that she doggedly attempts to buy Gordon's statue in the full conviction that Gordon will be sure to give it away if only she makes a generous offer:

"Give you seventeen dollars for it. Cash."

"No."

She looked at him with a sort of patient exasperation. "...Don't tell me you haven't got any use for seventeen dollars, living like you do. I bet you haven't got five dollars to your name, right now. ...I'll give you twenty dollars, seventeen in cash." (270-1)

Although Patricia has no interest in art and, according to Miss Jameson, doesn't even read, she gets so enchanted with a tall tale about Al Jackson narrated by Fairchild that she entreats him to continue the tale to the end. Faulkner has put this episode into the novel as an example of the power of art: a tall tale can charm even those of the younger generation, like Patricia, who have no understanding of art.

5

Jenny Steinbauer is even less interested in art than Patricia, probably due to the fact that she has working class origins. Even Patricia is surprised at Jenny's ignorance of art, which the following scene shows very clearly. Patricia tells Jenny that the painter Miss Jameson wants Pete to let her paint him in a picture, and the two teenaged girls talk about this topic:

"...Pete says he wouldn't let any strange woman see him without any clothes on. He's not used to things like that."

"Oh," remarked the niece. Then: "So that's the way she wants to paint him, is it?"

"Why, that's the way they always do it, ain't it? In the nude?"...

"Good Lord, didn't you ever see a picture of anybody with clothes on? Where'd you get that idea from? From the movies?"

Jenny didn't reply. Then she said suddenly: "Besides, the ones with clothes on are all old ladies, or mayors or something." (142)

But when she listens to Fairchild's tall tale, she is totally enchanted with it just like Patricia, and "Jenny's round ineffable eyes were upon him [Fairchild], utterly without thought." (281) So even Jenny, a girl with practically no knowledge of art, can be fascinated by literature.

6

Patricia's twin brother, Theodore, referred to as Josh or Gus, spends much of his time carving the wooden bowl of a tobacco pipe. There is a parallel between his absorption in creating a special pipe and the sculptor Gordon's hardworking, and this parallel suggests that Josh can be considered an artist like Gordon.

There is also another parallel between Josh and Gordon in their attitude toward artistic

creation—money plays no role in it. As we have already seen, Gordon refuses to sell his statue to Patricia regardless of the price she has offered to him. In the same way, Josh never thinks of his pipe as a means of making money. Fairchild suggests, half jokingly, that when Josh completes his new pipe, the two of them will “form a stock company and get rich.” (120) After Fairchild has left, Josh curses him as a “poor goof.” (120) When Major Ayers sees Josh carving a pipe, he naturally considers its marketability and asks Josh: “Money in it, eh? Americans would buy a new kind of pipe, too. You’ve made arrangements for the marketing of it, of course?” (173) Josh, however, answers him by saying, “No, I’m just making it. For fun.” (173)

However, we discover that Josh’s artistic creation is severed from life. To find a better tool for his creation, he stole a rod from the engine room of the *Nausikaa* and unintentionally ran the yacht around. Later Patricia discovers his theft and confronts him, but Josh denies stealing anything. And though his theft has caused great trouble, he has no sense of guilt. For him anything is permissible if it is for his art. In this respect, Josh is a caricature of an artist who believes in the concept of “art for art’s sake.”

7

Dorothy Jameson, an unsuccessful painter, seems to have lost confidence in her artistic abilities. For her, art has turned out to be far less important than life itself. She relates to Pete, Jenny’s boyfriend, her conception of art as follows: “So many people waste their time over things like architecture and such. It’s much better to be a part of life, don’t you think? Much better to be in it yourself and make your own mistakes and enjoy making them and suffering for them, than to make your life barren through dedicating it to an improbable and ungrateful posterity....” (107) Her idea, expressed in this passage, leads to her total denial of the function of art. Life is of the utmost importance. That is why Miss Jameson admires a man like Pete who, she thinks, is “a part of life.” She asks Pete, “You don’t spend your time thinking about life, do you?” (107) and expresses her view of life in these words: “I think the serious things really are the things that make for happiness—people and things that are compatible, love. . . . So many people are content just to sit around and talk about them instead of getting out and attaining them.” (107)

Thus, in the topic of Art and Life, she emphasizes the importance of living a life to the full, rather than interpreting it through art. Her view of the topic of Art and Life then is quite the

opposite of Gordon's initial view of it.

8

Julius Kauffman, always referred to as "the Semitic man," has wide and deep knowledge of literature and plays an important role as a sort of literary critic in the novel.

He is the one who is the most critical of the novelist Dawson Fairchild, and his criticism covers various points: for example, criticism of Fairchild's provincialism and questionable characterization in his novels; his poor understanding of the function of words; his shallow optimism about life; and so on.

Other than the above role as a critic, Julius is also a commentator on art and artists, his views obviously those of Faulkner's. Julius finds an artist more entertaining than a shoe clerk because "he knows less about what he is trying to do." (211) On the theme of love and death, Julius says, "People in the old books died of heartbreak also, which was probably merely some ailment that any modern surgeon or veterinarian could cure out of hand. But people do not die of love. That's the reason love and death in conjunction have such an undying appeal in books: they are never very closely associated anywhere else." (227-8) Concerning the relationship between art and life, Julius' views are as follows: "Not only are most of our sins vicarious, but most of our pleasures are too. Look at our books, our stage, the movies. Who supports 'em? Not the young folks. They'd rather walk around or just sit and hold each other's hands." (229) The following comment on the function of art, however, is perhaps the deepest: "A book is the writer's secret life, the dark twin of a man: you can't reconcile them." (251)

We can say that Julius Kauffman is Faulkner's spokesperson, though not in all his opinions.

9

Eva Wiseman, Julius' sister, has mainly two roles in the novel: as a poet who writes modernistic poetry, and as a literary critic especially of Fairchild's literature.

In the novel Fairchild reads her poems out loud, and they discuss them. Her brother and Fairchild are critical of her poems.

Fairchild reads some stanzas from her book:

"The Raven bleak and Philomel



Amid the bleeding trees were fixed,  
His hoarse cry and hers were mixed  
And through the dark their droppings fell

“Upon the red erupted rose,  
Upon the broken branch of peach  
Blurred with scented mouths, that each  
To another sing, and close—” (247)

Julius criticizes her poems as “Mostly words . . . a sort of cocktail of words.” (247) Mrs. Wiseman protests fiercely that “[o]nly fools require ideas in verse,” (247) but her brother disagrees: “[T]here’s no nourishment in electricity, as you poets nowadays seem to believe.” (247) The above poems of Eva Wiseman’s that Fairchild has read aloud are those Faulkner himself wrote and are included in *A Green Bough* published in 1933. Julius’ severe criticism of her sister’s poems can be interpreted as Faulkner’s self-criticism as a “failed poet.”

The other role of Mrs. Wiseman is that of a literary critic. Just as is her brother Julius, she is critical of Fairchild: “Dawson clings to his conviction for the old reason: it’s good enough to live with and comfortable to die with—like a belief in immortality. Insurance against doubt or alarm.” (184) In the following discussion about Fairchild’s literature, however, she supports him. As opposed to Julius’ criticism that Fairchild has been following the American literary tradition represented by Emerson and Lowells, she tries to stand on the side of Fairchild: “[F]or a man like Dawson there is no better American tradition than theirs—if he but knew it. They may have sat among their objects, transcribing their Greek and Latin and holding correspondences across the Atlantic, but they still found time to put out of their New England ports with the Word of God in one hand and a belaying pin in the other and all sails drawing aloft; and whatever they fell foul of was American.” (242) Her participation in the discussion unmistakably broadens the argument; otherwise, the reader would hear only Julius’ opinions, which are sometimes—though not always—biased.

10

Mark Frost is a young poet. In the novel he is repeatedly called “the ghostly poet” (63, 69, 80, 83, 88, 95), “the ghostly young men” (54, 84) and a “ghostly figure.” (329) The word “sepulchrally” is used as in “The thin poet groaned sepulchrally, (66) and as “‘Sex and death,’ said Mark Frost sepulchrally.” (231) This clearly shows that Faulkner regards Mark Frost as an unremarkable poet.

Frost announces that he is “the best poet in New Orleans.” But his poems seem to be not very impressive: “Mark Frost, the ghostly young man, a poet who produced an occasional cerebral and obscure poem in four or seven lines reminding one somehow of the function of evacuation excruciatingly and incompletely performed.” (54) Faulkner also wrote this: The best poet in New Orleans groaned.” (86) He is obviously considered a minor, regional poet. Faulkner’s words, “Mark Frost depended utterly upon other people to get his time passed,” (329) suggest that Frost is not a real artist, because a real artist has to know how to use his own time for artistic creation.

Frost, however, at least once has something authentic to say regarding art and artists. He sums up that in Europe, “being an artist is a form of behavior; in America, it’s an excuse for a form of behavior.” (220)

11

Through the careful study of various characters in *Mosquitoes*, we have found out that Faulkner probed into the topic of art and life, of art and artists and others, widely and deeply, from the multiple views of various characters. It is rather surprising that a young Faulkner was already using this technique, which was to develop further in his later literary career. Each character plays multiple roles, which makes this novel highly complicated and rich in content. Many critics have argued that *Mosquitoes* is Faulkner’s weakest novel. Faulkner’s genius, however, is clearly shown even in his least respected novel.

Notes

1. Andre Bleikasten. *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner’s Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. 26.

2. William Faulkner. *Mosquitoes*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1997. All subsequent references to this novel are from this edition.

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