

Master Plan for William Faulkner Exhibition
University of Mississippi Museums, Oxford, Miss.
Proposed exhibition content

The concept behind the organization of the exhibit is to honor the complexity of William Faulkner's literary works, without either romanticizing or villainizing him. This is achieved partly by dividing the exhibit into two parts, the first focusing on his literary achievement, and the second on biographical aspects of this prominent Oxford figure. Throughout the exhibit a range of sources—quotes from Faulkner's fiction, photographs of him and the places he wrote about, artifacts (the Faulkner family Bible and his typewriter)—enhance the visitor's experience.

The entrance to the exhibit does not assume any knowledge of Faulkner but piques the interest of even the most knowledgeable visitor. A quiet gallery space, honoring the writer's capacity for silence, reveals footage of Oxford, Miss., during his funeral, as well as a poignant photograph of two men digging his grave. Opposite, visitors can read about the world's responses to his death, with excerpts from international newspapers.

To introduce Faulkner's written work in a way that also memorializes the man, the initial section of the exhibit focuses on Faulkner's literary achievement. A list of his books, stories, and literary prizes accompanies a survey of the themes he explored in his works. Next the visitor can explore details of Faulkner's working environment—the influence of the small southern town he called home, the solitude he so readily sought, and the typewriter and other tools he utilized.

For an interactive experience, visitors can try writing on an inverted wheelbarrow, as Faulkner is said to have done in composing *As I Lay Dying*. Further atmosphere derives from photographs of the novel he outlined on the walls of a room of his nearby home. Visitors can explore the unique way in which Faulkner manipulated time in his novels and examine some of his famously long sentences. Sections of his novel *The Sound and the*

Fury are presented in graphically, to explore what the book would look like had it been printed in three different colors—black, green, and red—the way that Faulkner intended.

Since the concept of place is so critical to understanding Faulkner and his works, the next section of the exhibit explores Yoknapatawpha, the fictional Mississippi county where the author set so many of his novels and stories. By examining large-scale representations of maps Faulkner drew of the place, visitors can identify where he set his various books and stories. Visitors can also compare and contrast this “mythical kingdom” with a map of the real Lafayette County, which Faulkner knew so intimately.

An exploration of Faulkner and place would not be complete without a tribute to his home, Rowan Oak—just a quarter mile away from the museum—and the intersecting Bailey woods, where Faulkner played as a child and rode horses throughout his later life. The exhibit highlights aspects of these places that were significant to the writer through photographs and other remembrances.

The final section of the exhibit invites the visitor to explore Faulkner as a multifaceted individual with a knack for role-playing and the theatrical. In keeping with the author’s distinction between “truth” and “the facts,” this section presents a series of different versions of the man, from various periods of his life. Text panels suggest that Faulkner is—like the characters in his fiction—best understood in the context of his history, place, and others. The exhibit presents him simultaneously as the heir to a local legacy, a child and student, an Oxford figure, a soldier, a gentleman farmer, a Hollywood screenwriter, a family man, and even a visual artist. Visitors can mix and match these impressions to emerge with their own conception of Faulkner.

While the exhibit opens with silence, it concludes with the spoken word, with a recording of one of Faulkner’s rare public appearances. Visitors enter a space where they can hear (and read) the address he gave upon receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950. This great statement, which marked the pinnacle of his professional success, is directed largely to

future generations and touches on the responsibility of the writer and the human condition. As visitors exit, they see quotes from a number of Faulkner's characters paired with a series of black-and-white photographs of Oxford dating from the final years of his life, creating a lens through which to view his hometown through his writing.

The exterior of the museum building offers another opportunity to interpret Bailey Woods and Rowan Oak—both adjacent to the museum grounds. A map of the area and photographs of the house are intended to lure the visitor inside the museum to the Faulkner exhibit, as well as out along the interpretive trail, where further information awaits them. The trail lends itself beautifully to discussions of Faulkner's interest in botany and biology and his writings about these subjects.