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William Faulkner's Final Days, Death, and Funeral

William Faulkner, a prominent, Nobel Prize laureate and American author of Southern literature, neared his death in the summer of 1962 (Blotner 751). There were a few events that led up to and potentially caused his death. The first incident included one of his favorite hobbies—horseback riding.

During Faulkner's last summer, he often enjoyed the leisurely sport of training and riding horses. On Sunday, June 17th, he worked with Stonewall, a horse that “was proving unruly and hard to train” (Blotner 708). Faulkner saddled him up and took him for a ride. However, after being spooked, Stonewall threw Faulkner off to a heavy, painful fall (708). This was not Faulkner's first injury from horseback riding. In fact, in January of the same year, 1962, Faulkner became injured from falling off of a horse in Charlottesville (751). Comparable to his determination to keep riding, Faulkner was resolute to return home after being thrown off of Stonewall. Therefore, he got up and limped home angrily (708). He then made his way to Felix Linder's house to receive his diagnosis. Faulkner suffered a “very painful groin injury,” according to Linder (708). Consequently, Faulkner had to use a cane because of his injury, and his physical condition worsened.

By Tuesday, Faulkner was in bed complaining of recurring back pain, but he did not mention to his doctor, Chester McLarty, anything about his recent fall (Blotner 709). McLarty offered to provide Faulkner with pain medication but insisted that he get back treatment at the

Campbell Clinic in Memphis (709). However, Faulkner refused to go, because he did not consider the past treatment he had received at the clinic to be helpful at all. Instead, Faulkner planned to simply take medication to ease his pain.

That next Sunday, McLarty ran into Faulkner at the post office and found him to be quite pale. When McLarty approached Faulkner, concerned by his pallor, Faulkner explained that he consistently “needed a pain tablet at night to rest” (Blotner 709). Worried by Faulkner’s worsening condition, Chester urged Faulkner to get treatment at the Campbell Clinic. But Faulkner continued to show no initiative or interest in going.

Perhaps because of his resistance to seek medical attention but continual, intensifying pain, Faulkner began to foreshadow his own approaching death. One day, he was conversing with Felix Linder and confessed his worry of death: “‘Felix,’ he said, ‘I don’t want to die’” (Blotner 709). Faulkner was beginning to see “that wall of oblivion he had so often mentioned [in his literary works, such as *A Fable*], and he did not want to pass through it” (709). Linder offered more medication, but explained that because he was retired, he would not be able to operate on Faulkner.

Linder and McLarty were not the only ones concerned about Faulkner’s poor health. Faulkner’s friends and family began to notice the “pallor Chester McLarty had observed” (Blotner 710). And when Jane Coers asked Faulkner how he was feeling, he responded that he was neither comfortable when he sat or lied down (710). But perhaps knowing his death was approaching, Faulkner became more adventurous with his money, as he aspired to purchase Red Acres—an estate with an asking price of \$200,000 (710). He was willing to gamble on it and insisted that Linton wire him \$50,000 “on demand” (710). Faulkner was adamant about purchasing Red Acres before he passed away.

However, Faulkner's extreme spending did not disguise his pain. On Tuesday, July 3rd, Faulkner continued suffering from back pain and became forgetful because of his unbearable and consistent agony. That night at dinner with his wife Estelle, Faulkner observed that "things hadn't been tasting right" (Blotner 711). He then began drinking. The next day, Independence Day, Faulkner remained in bed and continued drinking, mixing alcohol with "prescription painkillers" (711-12). Later that night, Chester McLarty came by to check on Faulkner. McLarty did not find any "alarming symptoms"; although, he, Estelle, and Jimmy discussed sending Faulkner to the hospital (712). And Faulkner was worse the next day, for his pain was "close to unbearable and his drinking was getting out of hand" (712). Estelle was also worried that Faulkner was not controlling his painkillers and tranquilizers appropriately. She suggested that it was time for him to go to the Wright's Sanitarium in Byhalia (712). To everyone's surprise, Faulkner did not hesitate but instead seemed eager to get better. He was admitted to the sanitarium "at 6 p.m., July 5, 1962" (712). Dr. Wright checked Faulkner's blood pressure and heart, and considered both to be normal. But Faulkner complained of chest pains as well as back pains. Faulkner began his treatment of "vitamins, Benadryl, and the other standard medications indicated," but Dr. Wright decided there was no need for pain medication (713). Unfortunately, only hours later—"a few minutes after half past one"—Faulkner "stirred and then sat up on the side of his bed. Before the nurse could reach him he groaned and fell over" (713). Dr. Wright came to Faulkner's bed immediately, but when he got there, he was unable to "detect any pulse or heartbeat" (713). He gave Faulkner an external heart massage for forty-five minutes, but it was clear that "William Faulkner was gone" at the age of sixty-five (713). There was nothing else Dr. Wright could do. Dr. Wright identified Faulkner's cause of death as a "coronary occlusion" (714).

The hospital then called Estelle to break the shocking news. She was astonished, because Faulkner had “gone to the hospital so many times before, often sicker than he seemed [the day prior], and when they left he had seemed in no danger” (Blotner 713). Still in disbelief, she relayed the message to Jimmy and asked if he would break the news to the other family members and close friends. John, Faulkner’s brother, took the responsibility of handling the funeral arrangements. John reflected on his brother joking “about living to be a hundred, and he had survived his mother by only a few years” (714). But Blotner suggests that the funeral details would have “amused the author of *As I Lay Dying*,” explaining that Faulkner’s body “lay in a closed, plain wooden coffin covered with silver-gray cotton felt” (714). Maud Faulkner, William Faulkner’s mother, “had said she wanted the quickest and cheapest funeral possible: no one but the family, no flowers, and no fuss”; and as he made the arrangements for his brother’s funeral, “John remembered that Bill said he wanted his to be ‘just like Mother’s’” (715). However, some of his family members thought that the coffin was too small and believed Faulkner deserved a better one. Dot Oldham asked Estelle if they should put Faulkner in a nicer coffin, and Estelle planned to leave it to Jimmy. But Dot did not wait; instead, she proceeded with sending the original one back. Subsequently, William Faulkner was laid in a “closed coffin of cypress covered in dark-gray wool felt, its large heavy silver-plated handles glinting in the parlor’s subdued light” (715). And the funeral procession began.

While Faulkner wanted his funeral to remain small and simple—similar to his mothers—, to be expected, “[a]ll day the press had been coming into town, gathering what facts they could, making assumptions in their absence” (Blotner 716). Jimmy and Jack refused their questions, but later that night met the press at The Mansion. Jack relayed what he knew William Faulkner would have wanted him to say: ““that we understood their mission and wished to cooperate with

them, but that we could not permit them to make interviews or take photographs at his residence. We asked only that they handle their assignments with the understanding befitting the event” (716). Dick Elliott also spoke to the press to ensure that they respected the family’s privacy and last moments with William Faulkner. Elliott told them, “Until he’s buried he belongs to the family. After that he belongs to the world” (716). In a shining limousine, Faulkner’s body was driven out to the cemetery and was put in the ground by six pallbearers. Duncan Gray said the final prayers, and then “it was over” (Blotner 718).

For days, telephone calls and telegrams came from the president, Robert Frost, as well as many neighbors and friends (Blotner 716). The Faulkner house was filled with people mourning the loss of the legendary American author. He will forever be missed, but he continues to live on through his remarkable literary works.

Works Cited

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