William Faulkner has given us a vivid and densely textured picture of the racial tensions that have shaped our personal and political landscape since the Civil War. In his fiction he focuses on the inner drama that comes from living in a racially mixed society. His is a story found not in history books but in the memories of its narrators who are forced to confront a past which threatens to destroy their lives. Rather than a linear narrative told from a single perspective, Faulkner creates multiple disjunctive stories obsessively told and retold from different perspectives. His fiction invites us to reflect on the way the mind remembers and responds to the past, the relation between storytelling and personal and collective identity, and the role of myth and tradition in southern culture.

Our course, however, will have a double focus: on the one hand the fictional world of America’s greatest twentieth-century novelist, on the other the real world of southern slavery and its aftermath in the second half of the nineteenth century. We will thus be bridging two disciplines, literary criticism and history, and attempting to see how each illuminates the other. Along with selections from W.E.B. Dubois The Souls of Black Folks (1903), and C.Van Woodward The Burden of Southern History, we shall draw on a number of first-person slave narratives; legal documents ranging from the early slave laws to the Supreme Court case of Plessy v. Ferguson (1898) which set the terms of the subsequent debate on segregation. Throughout we shall be engaged in intensive study of three of Faulkner’s most demanding works: The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom, and Go Down Moses.

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