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**Fact Versus Fiction as a Narrative Technique in
William Faulkner's Novels: A Study of *The Sound and
the Fury* (1929) *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom,
Absalom* (1936)**

A Thesis

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to study the virtual boundaries between "fact" and "fiction" and their relation to the concept of reality with special reference to the historical works of William Faulkner. Chapter one offers a critical perspective that explores the changing nature of the boundaries between fact and fiction throughout various literary ages: namely, realism, modernism, and postmodernism, and their impact on the form and content of the historical novel. It further suggests that the form and content of the historical novel has changed due to the change in the concept of reality that affected the relation between fact and fiction in the literary text. The main objective of this thesis concentrates on Faulkner's realist mode and experimental techniques, emphasizing the depiction of fact versus fiction in Faulkner's representation of the American South, exploring his view of history, and highlighting the universal significance of his work.

Chapter two deals with *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) through investigating Faulkner's talent in dealing with fact versus fiction as a narrative technique so as to depict the moral crisis of the South after the Civil War (1861-1865), endowing his novels with universal themes. Chapter three deals with *Light in August*

(1932), through discussing Faulkner's attitudes towards the fundamentalist religious doctrines, highlighting fact versus fiction as transcending the limits of his region, to enhance the passive effect of the fundamentalist doctrines on the human being in general. Chapter four deals with *Absalom, Absalom* (1936), exploring Faulkner's creative technique in interweaving fact with fiction to reveal his viewpoint of history as a continuum of the past, present and future and as always being susceptible to change. Finally the conclusion sums up the findings of the study, focusing mainly on Faulkner's innovative techniques.

Key Words and literary terms:

Fact and fiction -- Narrative Technique – Realism –
Modernism – Post-Modernism.

Chapter One

Boundaries between Fact and Fiction:

A Theoretical Background

‘Fact’ is derived from the Latin word ‘factum’, meaning "event or occurrence or something done" (Hall, 22). It is defined as a piece of information about a circumstance that has existed or an event that has occurred. It is virtually saying that the information that is verified is true and actually occurred, namely, history. ‘Fiction’, on the other hand, is defined as "an imaginative creation or a pretense that does not represent actuality but has been invented" (Hall, 23), it is derived from the Latin word ‘fiction’ meaning ‘the action of shaping or feigning’. ‘Fiction’, according to Briana Pope, "is literature in the form of prose that describes imaginary events and people. It is a fabrication or an invention"(7). This definition seems to assume an absolute fact/fiction distinction, as if the actual were synonymous with the non fictional. It shows the existence of a clear distinction between narratives which are perceived to be true, those which have an historical basis because of their depiction of a real character or a true event, and the narratives which, in fictionalized form, are meant to entertain and to import a moral lesson. However, many critics have argued that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is illusory. E.L. Doctorow, for example, proposed that history and fiction were indistinguishable, regarding narrative as a

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larger, more pervasive category in which both fiction and history could be subsumed. He summarized this position saying: "There is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative" (46).

In general, the boundaries between 'fact' and 'fiction', in the context of written narratives, are always fuzzy and changeable. Critics do not agree on the extent to which 'fact' and 'fiction' differ and whether they can be distinguished in a text. There are three current arguments that view the relationship between fictional and factual discourse differently. The first argument is based on Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's proposal. They affirm that:

The novel has historically synthesized two narrative impulses, [...] one directed toward the 'empirical', or historical, and the other directed toward the 'fictional', or imaginary. Empirical and fictional are blended tendencies, rather than distinctive kinds; history and fantasy stand as the poles of a narrative spectrum, with different narrative forms such as autobiography, realism, and occupying positions at various points along the scale. (qtd in Foley, 29)

The direct representation of experience would be history or purely empirical narrative. The opposite extreme at the right would be fantasy or a purely imaginary world. Between the

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extremes lie 'realism' and 'romance'. "Realism", according to Hollowell, "strives to present the world 'as it is' and is closely related to history". "Romance", on the other hand, "presents the world 'as it might be' or 'as it should be'. Most narratives, however, are a combination of the various elements" (25).

Contrary to this idea of fiction and non-fiction as concepts that can not be clearly defined, Barbara Hernstein Smith believes that the distinction between fact and fiction is absolute, regarding the novel as an imitation of biographical (or autobiographical) discourse (x-xii). The third theory, devised by post-structuralism, argues that all discourses, either factual or fictive, are influenced by the language and ideology of the author and are therefore fictive in effect if not in intent" (Foely 29-33).

Historically, the key concept for analyzing and describing the narrative fiction has been the Greek concept of mimesis that began at the turn of the fifth century B.C. The first two important discussions of mimesis in *Plato's Republic* and a little later in *Aristotle's Poetics* developed two quite divergent conceptions which have structured Western attitudes toward fiction up to this day. In fact, Plato and Aristotle base their notion of art upon the same fundamental assumption that art is a form of mimesis. Imitating reality, for them, is an ultimate aim of art. Yet, the process of imitation that is used in both cases is profoundly

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different as it is related to the particular concept reality espoused by each one of them.

Plato sees reality as a shadow of a realm of pure ideas. Ultimate reality, Plato states in book II of *The Republic*: “... is spiritual. This spiritual real, the one is composed of ideal forms or absolutes that exist whether or not any mind posits their existence or reflects their attributes” (378). Everything in the physical world, to Plato, is but an inferior copy of an ideal form existing in the real spiritual world, which in turn is copied by art. Thus, art imitates a world that is already far removed from authentic reality. Truth exists only in intellectual abstraction, that is, paradoxically, more real than concrete objects. Consequently, Plato's theory of representation is founded on a strong opposition between imitation of ideas and imitation of appearances i.e ‘the empirical world’. The representation of events as such, contrary to rational argument, is an imitation of appearances, which means that it is cut off from truth. He further posits a strong opposition between mimesis and diegesis. Speaking about stories and myths, he distinguishes between three forms of narration: a pure story (*haple diegesis*), in which the poet speaks in his own name without pretending to be someone else; a story by mimesis (imitation), in which the poet speaks through his characters as in tragedy and comedy, meaning that he pretends to be someone else; and a mixed form combining the two previous forms as in

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epic poetry, where pure narrations is mixed with character's discourse. Plato's preference goes to narration, for he disapproves of the representation by mimesis. He goes so far as to exclude mimetic artist from the "Ideal City". Mimesis is a simulacrum, an 'as if', and as such it is opposed to truth. According to Plato art is a form of lying because the artist's imitation of reality is but an imitation of an imitation 'thrice removed from the truth', and consequently it hinders the citizen from what is moral and real.

The concept of mimesis developed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* diverges from Plato in several important regards. Aristotle approaches reality from a completely different premise. To Aristotle, the world exists in an infinitively diverse series of parts. These various parts are open to human observation and scrutiny. Thus, he sees reality as a process of partially realized forms moving towards their ideal realization. He is influenced by Plato's idea of mimeses but he gives it a new turn. Generally, he does not attempt to dispute the fact that imitation will not produce perfect copies of an original. Instead, he describes imitation as a creative process of selection, translation, and transformation from one media to another. With these considerations, Aristotle definitively relieves mimesis of the demand that it refers to a given reality. Consequently, he frees the imitation from its negative connotation, regarding the poet as a creator not an imitator. For Aristotle the poet does not merely imitate reality, but creates a

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coherent and plausible world that reflects the real world where the critical point is that mimesis produces fiction. The poet creates something that previously did not exist and for which there are no available models. The poet achieves his works by means of fiction, which universalizes the plot and makes the distinction between poetic writing and the writing of history.

The distinction between fact and fiction has prevailed the literary scene since Aristotle. In *The Poetics*, he contrasted the constricted world of factual events of history with the boundless imaginative realm of the storyteller's art. He states that the difference between the two lies "in the fact that the historian narrates events that have actually happened, whereas the poet writes about things as they might occur" (ix, 17). He argues that "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen. What is possible according to the law of probability or necessity (ix, 55). For Aristotle, history deals with facts and relates what actually happened. Poetry, on the other hand, relates what may or ought to have happened, since it "is more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular: [IX, 55]. Thus he sees poetry as an art created by an author who thinks in terms of 'what might happen'. In history, he argues, an event is written when it is accepted by the community to have actually taken place, he suggests that a historian does not create events,

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but reports them, often textually, by mentioning the event and its date. In other words, "in Aristotle's vision of history, there is no room for creation, authorship, or plagiarism" [Salama, 217]. The task of the historian, then, is to use language restrictedly to imitate or represent particular events as they have occurred. In this sense, Aristotle's theory seems to suggest that both of history and poetry are two modes of rhetorical arts, but they deal with two different realms. This dichotomy has structured the Western attitude up to the 19th century, generating the realistic tradition which is more affiliated to the Aristotelian mimesis. Hyden White puts it this way:

Before the nineteenth century, the relation between historical writing and literary writing was not problematic. Since Aristotle, it had been thought that, although both history and imaginative writing were rhetorical arts, they dealt with different things: historical writing was about the real world, while "poetry" was about the possible. [Tropes for the past, 25]

Complying with this dichotomy, the early discussion of the relation between history and fiction during the 16th and 17th centuries was focused mainly on the need to separate fact and fiction in the writing of history. The moral and educational role assigned thereby to history meant that fiction would not be regarded as another method of ascertaining the truth about human

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beings in society and time. Instead, it was in danger of being viewed as separate from such a goal. William Nelson traces the entanglement of the categories of history and fiction in the Renaissance. He notes that:

the writers of antiquity had a rather tolerant attitude towards the admix of the fabulous in works of history and biography and attributes the sharpened opposition of the two categories, at least in part, to Christianity, with its Hebraic tradition, which surely gave force to the idea that it was important to distinguish the veritable past from falsehood and fiction". (7)

During the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, Nelson proceeds, "historians persisted in their attempts to sharpen the distinction between the fictional and the historical, including in this program an increased concern for the authenticity of sources and a concomitant support for abandoning the "classical license to invent speeches and descriptions"(41). He concludes that "by the seventeenth century the gap between history and fiction had widened to the point where one could no longer mix the two genres without qualms" (105).

The boundaries between fact and fiction repeatedly preoccupied the critics during the 18th century. David Hume, (1711-1776), upholds the distinction between history and fiction, seeing the relation between them through their common use of

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narrative. To Hume, the historian's role is to understand the past, since the historian's ordering and narration of events create an understanding that does not exist prior to this narrative ordering, while the role of the novelist is to create knowledge. This perceived differences between the novelist and the historian is derived from debates about whether the knowledge produced is authentic knowledge of an actual past or probable knowledge of a possible past. (100-120)

Hume's preference goes to history, regarding it as superior to fiction, because it depends upon verifiable evidence. He says "Truth, however necessary it may seem in all works of genius, has no other effect than to procure an easy reception for the ideas, and to make the mind acquiesce in them with satisfaction, or at least without reluctance" (iii,121). He refers to the difference between reading romance and history as one between two levels of effect. Hume says:

If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas and in the same order ... tho' [the author's] testimony has not the same influence on them. The latter[the one reading as if reading history] has a more lively conception of all the incidents... while the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a