



# William Faulkner: Letters and Fictions

*James G. Watson*

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Besides the groundbreaking novels and stories that brought him fame, William Faulkner throughout his life wrote letters—to his publisher, his lovers, his family, and his friends. In this first major study of epistolarity in Faulkner's work, James G. Watson examines Faulkner's personal correspondence as a unique second canon of writing, separate from his literary canon with its many fictional letters but developing along parallel lines. By describing the similarity of forms and conventions in Faulkner's personal and fictional correspondence, Watson clearly demonstrates that Faulkner's personal experience as a writer of letters significantly shaped his imaginative work early and late.

Letters are always about themselves; they re-create a world between the sender and the receiver. In this illuminating study, Faulkner's personal letters are treated as a form of reflexive writing: first-person narratives in which Sender self-consciously portrays Self to a specific Receiver, likewise portrayed in the letter-text. This duality of actual experience and imaginative re-creation measures the personal distances between the life of the writer and the written self-image. It reveals that letters are at once fragments of autobiography and fictions of self.

Such "laws of letters" apply equally to the letters that appear throughout Faulkner's novels and stories. The twenty-one letters and telegrams in *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, portray character, propel plot, and convey important themes of failed communication and broken identity. From *Soldiers' Pay* to his last work, Faulkner's carefully lettered canon of fiction is dramatic evidence of his understanding of epistolarity and of the extent to which he adapted letters, including some of his own, to shape his fictional world.

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