



# “A Modernist Lampstand”: Noir and the Avant-garde in William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*

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**Abstract.** This essay considers *Sanctuary* in the context of William Faulkner’s career-long predilection for crime fiction, interpreting his avant-garde appropriation and manipulation of genre writing in the novel against the background of its relationship to American naturalism (including the noir novel) and nineteenth-century European realism.

Lady Macbeth I always admire.

—William Faulkner in an interview with  
Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, *The Paris Review*, 1956

This essay examines *Sanctuary* in the context of William Faulkner’s career-long predilection for crime fiction, placing the novel’s avant-garde appropriation and manipulation of genre writing against the background of its relationship to American naturalism (including the noir novel) and its author’s deep investment in nineteenth-century European realism. Although the gangsterism at the heart of *Sanctuary* certainly savors of contemporaneous pulp crime fiction, the contention here is that Faulkner’s treatment of this material enabled him, at the end of the Twenties, to break new narrative ground alongside the powerful experiments in stream of consciousness in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. In *Sanctuary* popular literary form stimulates Faulkner to further innovation, mass culture providing a shot in the arm to the modernist mode he had established by 1930.

Faulkner would come to reviewers’ notice in the first instance as the author of a post-World War I novel, *Soldier’s Pay*. Yet his penchant for war fiction—reaching its grandiose apogee in *A Fable*—is easily matched by the frequency with which he turned his hand to the genre of crime fiction.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1920s and early 1930s Faulkner wrote both the short war-fiction that would

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