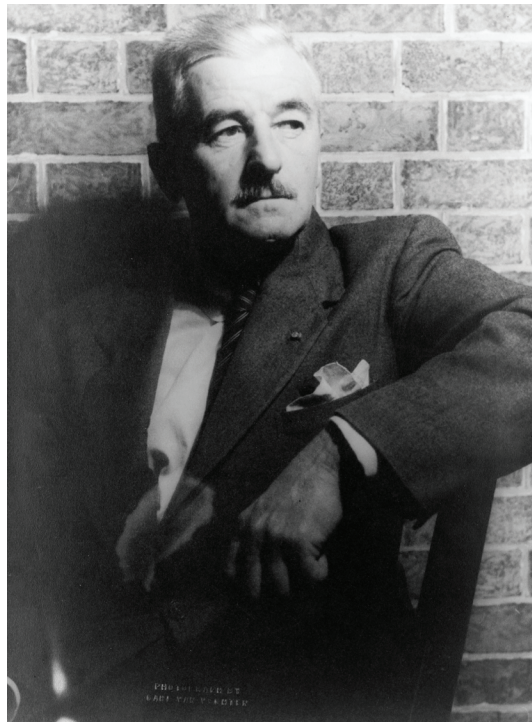

Objectives:

- Students will be able to analyze a rhetorical work, and to understand its cultural influence and its historical significance.
- Students will be able to use context clues to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words.
- Students will be able to correctly use vocabulary words.

William Faulkner (1897 – 1962)

William Cuthbert Faulkner was an American writer of novels, short stories, poetry, and screenplays. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954 for “his powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel.” He was grouped together with other Southern writers such as Mark Twain, Robert Penn Warren, Flannery O’Conner, Truman Capote, Harper Lee, and Tennessee Williams. Though most of Faulkner’s work was set in his native Mississippi, the universality, or ability to be used in any context, of his themes gave his writing world-wide appeal.



“The Nobel Prize for Literature Acceptance Speech” was given on December 10, 1954. In it, Faulkner tried to convey how the world had changed since the end of the Second World War. The United States and the Soviet Union were in the depth of the Cold War, and with the spread of atomic weapons, there was a high level of genuine fear in the world. Faulkner addressed that fear in his speech and claimed it changed contemporary, or current, writers. He then suggested where to look to find subjects worthy of an author’s efforts. He ended his speech by explaining his idea of the highest purpose of literature.

Faulkner begins the speech by saying that it is his work that is being honored, not him. He says:

I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work – a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before.

Later in his speech, Faulkner refers to “a general and universal physical fear.” In order to understand to what he is referring, one needs to know the **historical** and **cultural significance** of when this speech was given. In 1950, America and the United Nations were fighting the Korean War. The war was fought between Communist and non-Communist forces. The United States was also involved in what was called the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Both countries had atomic weapons and threatened to use them on the other. There was a very real fear that one day the whole world was going to be blown up by atomic bombs. Faulkner refers to this fear in the following passage:

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up? Faulkner goes on to say that this ever present fear has made young writers forget what they should be writing about. Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat. He must learn them again.

Until he learns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man.

Faulkner ends his speech by explaining what he believes to be the true, the highest, purpose of writing:

The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

Faulkner is saying that it is the duty of a writer to help man succeed, “to prevail,” by writing works that “lift his heart.” The poet's writing should be “a pillar” on which mankind can stand and grow. This is a powerful message, and one which has inspired authors around the world since the speech was given.

Context Clues

Context clues are “helper” words and phrases within a sentence and the surrounding sentences and paragraphs that can help you understand an unfamiliar word. Being able to understand what you are reading will help you better grasp the full meaning of the literary work.

But I would like to do the same with the **acclaim** too, by using this moment as a **pinnacle** from which I might be listened to by the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail, among whom is already that one who will some day stand where I am standing.

Can you use the context to figure out what the words **acclaim** and **pinnacle** mean? Faulkner is receiving the world’s highest honor for literature, thus we can understand that he is receiving enthusiastic and public praise; that is **acclaim**. The Nobel Prize is one of the world’s highest, so a “pinnacle” is the best, or most successful, place.

To whom is Faulkner speaking? We can also use context to help us figure this out. Faulkner already described his writing as portraying “the agony and sweat of the human spirit,” so “the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail” must be fellow authors. He also says that one of those young authors will one day be awarded the Nobel Prize, too. Can you use helping words to figure what “verities” and “ephemeral” mean in the passage below?

...the old **verities** and truths of the heart, the universal truths lacking which any story is **ephemeral** and doomed – love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.

“Verities” is coupled with the words “truth” and “universal truths,” so it must be similar to “truths.” In fact, the word “verity” means something that is regarded as true. Ephemeral is coupled with the word “doomed,” so it must mean something similar. In fact, **ephemeral** means lasting for a very short time. In other words, something ephemeral dies quickly.

Many people thought that Faulkner’s writing was pessimistic, which means to lack hope or confidence in the future. Faulkner used this speech to correct those people.

I decline to accept the end of man... I believe that man will not only endure: he will **prevail**. He is immortal...because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

Again, how can you use context to understand what the word “prevail means? Re-read the section and decide what Faulkner is saying about the future of mankind. He obviously has a lot of confidence in it, so “prevail” must be something positive. **Prevail** means “to be victorious.”

Growth & Assessment

1. Faulkner described his writing as portraying what?
 - a. A good story
 - b. The agony and sweat of the human spirit
 - c. Our tragedy today
 - d. The Nobel Prize
2. What is a pinnacle?
 - a. The highest place
 - b. Public praise
 - c. Something that is true
 - d. Anguish and travail
3. Who was Faulkner addressing in his speech?
 - a. The President
 - b. US Congress
 - c. Communists
 - d. Young authors
4. Define the word “prevail”.
5. What does Faulkner believe was the duty of a writer?