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William Faulkner’s Jackson Square

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Jackson Square, until 1844 called the Place d’Armes, gives New Orleans an element of Old World charm. When William Faulkner came to the city in 1925, the square was in decline because the center of city life had moved up the Mississippi River to the American side of Canal Street. The decaying atmosphere and the near-Mediterranean light attracted and affected writers and artists, including Sherwood Anderson and William Spratling, both of whom provided Faulkner a place to stay near the square. Clearly the light in New Orleans inspired William Faulkner, as his letters to his mother, his sketches in the Times-Picayune and his novel Mosquitoes suggest. He also must have felt the influence of other artists and writers in the city, such as William Woodward, whose paintings bathed the French Quarter in Mediterranean pastels and favored the tensions between light and dark in its shadows. Also working in the French Quarter at that time was Pope Whitewell, a photographer who manipulated photographs to achieve light and dark effects, especially soft light.

In Mosquito, a fictional treatment of the artistic and literary colony in New Orleans, Faulkner portrays Jackson Square as dark, one of the more magical moments for the interplay of light and dark in this warm, humid atmosphere.

The violet dark held in soft suspension lights like a bellflower. Jackson Square was now a green and quiet lake in which shades shifted round as jellyfish, feathering with silver minnows and pomegranate and hibiscus beneath which lanterna fled and blud. Ponthieu and cathedral scattered from black paper and painted flat on a green sky above them taller palms were fixed in black soundless explosions.

As an aside point in the book, Faulkner describes the square an hour later in the evening. While his emphasis continues on the effects of humidity, the light is now characterized in terms of the coolness of the moon, not the last glow of the warm sun.

Looking through the tall pickets into Jackson Square was like looking into an aquarium—a must and unswerving gimblet-bluey-green of all shades from ink black to a thin and rigid feathering of silver on pomegranate and minnow-like coral in a hidden sea, amid which golden lights hung dull and unchanging as jellyfish, insidious yet without seeming to emanate light, and in the center of St. Andrew’s baroque plunging statue [Clark Mills’ equestrian sculpture of Jackson] mumbled about with thin glances as though he too were recently vetted.

In the 1920s, the French Quarter was slowly recovering from abandonment by the old Creole families; today the neighborhood reflects its role as New Orleans’ greatest tourist attraction. Jackson Square literally forms the
city's spiritual center. By day in "banquettes" courtes with visitors listening to street musicians, watching dancers and jugglers, and smelling the aromas of gumbo and étouffée mixed with the odors of the Mississippi River.

The crowds move less hurriedly at dusk, and the Pontalba apartment build-
ings, which flank the square, begin to reflect the rays of the setting sun. As
tours of visitors pass through the square, the blue and red neon lights of
restaurants and jazz clubs flash on like disorderly
codes in the darkening nar-
row streets that adjoin the
square. The birds disap-
pear into trees and building
cornices. As darkness
advances the lights across
the square come on sugges-
tively, their rays blunted by
the rising humidity.

Since Faulkner's time
the riverfront warehouse,
dark places from which
Faulkner observed the
lights of both the river and
the city, have been removed.
The passing lights of ships
gliding along the river
remind us that the square
now is less a destination
itself than a space across
which people travel to dis-
ner and music. As greater
numbers of people avail
about this public park, the
light in Jackson Square
remains a catalyst affecting
people and environment.

Notes

2. Bd., 49.


Jackson Square at dusk. Photo © Alan Karchmer.