Matthew Dischinger / Georgia State University
Lesson Plan: William Faulkner's "Death Drag"

This is a two-day lesson plan for teaching Faulkner's short story "Death Drag" in a southern literature course, or any course in which the South becomes a particular focus. While the plan could be adapted to fit other spaces, I've fashioned it so that it fits my students at Georgia State University in Downtown Atlanta.

The story is set in Faulkner's Jefferson County and told through a narrative voice that often resembles that of the community itself. The plot details a traveling barnstorming act, or a team of men doing stunts involving airplanes. In the story, a man clearly marked by the narration as Jewish performs the death drag by moving between a car and a plane and, in the process, crashes through a barn.

IN CLASS ACTIVITIES – Day One

To begin our discussion, students work in small groups to locate passages in the story in which one of the two men who performs the death drag, is described.

The following descriptions are typical:

He was handsome in a dull, quiet way; from his face, a man of infrequent speech. When he came up the spectators saw that he, like the limping man, was also a Jew. That is, they knew at once that two of the strangers were of a different race from themselves, without being able to say what the difference was.

He had a nose which would have been out of proportion to a man six feet tall. As shaped by his close helmet, the entire upper half of his head down to the end of his nose would have fitted a six-foot body. But below that, below a lateral line bisecting his head from the end of his nose to the back of his skull, his jaw, the rest of his face, was not two inches deep. His jaw was a long, flat line clapping-to beneath his nose like the jaw of a shark, so that the tip of his nose and the tip of his jaw almost touched.

After cataloguing these and other descriptions, we discuss how they fit into prevailing stereotypes about Jews both in the South and far beyond the region's borders. Returning to groups, students would then catalogue moments in the story that focus on two cultural objects the story places in opposition: the airplane and the barn. Again, two characteristic moments:

The airplane appeared over town with almost the abruptness of an apparition. It was travelling fast; almost before we knew it was there it was already at the top of a loop; still over the square, in violation of both city and government ordinance.

On one side is a grove of trees which the owner will not permit to be felled; on another is the barnyard of a farm: sheds and houses, a long barn with a roof of rotting shingles, a big haycock. The airplane had come to rest in the fence corner near the barn.

We would discuss how the plane is often described as a both impressive and intrusive technology and that the barn, conversely, is (obviously) stationary and also "rotting."

The death drag causes two sorts of conflict in the story. It causes the community to question the humanity of the men who perform the stunt (one woman exclaims, "It ain't a man!") while also showing how mobility and technology work in obvious conflict to the pastoral South that the community (as an example of the larger southern community) has idealized. The actual image of the pastoral is, on the other hand, a *rotting* barn.

IN CLASS ACTIVITIES – Day Two

Students will have read Leah Garrett's "Trains and Train Travel in Modern Yiddish Literature." We will use it, as well as a brief lecture on the Galveston Plan and IRO to historicize the conflict in the story and think about how Jews, movement, and technology meet in the South outside of Faulkner's story.

Students will also arrive having reviewed Marnie Davis's history of Georgia Avenue, a short walk off campus that we would take ourselves. One noteworthy connection between Davis's work and ours is that many Jewish communities in Downtown Atlanta were displaced and moved to build Atlanta's downtown connector. The connector, as Davis notes, was a destructive force for those communities. Stopping at a new development by GSU (one of the latest development projects in this area), we would return to the framework our first class installed to consider how the relocation of one of Atlanta's most robust Jewish communities fits into the framework we installed in our first class.

The point at which I would hope for my students to arrive through all this work is a better understanding of how Jewish southerners have been viewed as both symbolic of mobility and otherness while also being themselves frequently moved. I would draw upon Jenna Weissman Joselit's NEH lecture to help students understand how their local environment might relate to broader regional and national trends.