

Delusional history:
escaping the past in
"the sound and the
fury"



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For Benjy and Quentin Compson, memory in "The Sound and the Fury" is a tool for discovering and escaping reality. Both brothers have trouble seeing the past as part of a chain linked to both the present and the future. Benjy does not recognize linear time, giving his memories the same qualities as his contemporary experiences. Quentin chooses to ignore his present and live in his childhood memories. Both brothers find solace in their recollections of the past because they are seeking protection from an unpredictable world that is moving faster than they can keep up. Benjy is allowed to narrate first, because he is the only one who is incapable of lying. He cannot embellish stories, nor can he control his memories. Due to his severe mental disability, he is cannot think subjectively; to him, life is an endless present tense of images, sounds, and thoughts that he cannot decipher, reflect on, or arrange in any meaningful manner. He has no concept of time; because his memories are seamlessly connected to visual and auditory cues from the present, he considers them equivalent to current experiences. As a result, he is unaware of the concepts of cause and consequence, and does not hold onto grudges or guilt like his brothers do. Unlike Quentin and Jason, who are so obsessed with Caddy that their perceptions of any history with her are skewed by their ability to consciously shape their memories, Benjy's oblivious merging of memory and reality contributes to his almost inhuman objectivity. He has no opinions, no real differentiation in his descriptions. He enforces his neutrality on those whom he quotes, always reporting that "he said", "she said" - never "he warned" or "she laughed", regardless of the situation. Free from time's movement and judgment calls, Benjy is completely static, letting history put itself in order while he takes it all in. The timelessness of Benjy's account means that he cannot discriminate between present and past, and <https://assignbuster.com/delusional-history-escaping-the-past-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

therefore relives both memory and experience as they occur. As a result, he is fixed in a process of constantly regenerating Caddy in memory and losing her at the same time, of constructing while simultaneously tearing down. It is as if he sees the shadow of the dead Caddy, only to have it replaced by her live self. He lives in a continuous cycle of loss and degenerative change, which Quentin failed to accomplish; his memory is composed of infinite life-death rotations. His mind has the ability to bring something back to life only to promptly abandon it moments later. Rather than measure a forward-moving stream of memories on a linear time scale, Benny maps his rush of experiences against a potent, instinctive sense of order and chaos. His memory is predictable; his recollections are all networked to each other. However, his memories to the typically linear past-present-future structure as flooding is to flowing, as seas are to rivers: discrete blocks tumbling over one another with no clear direction. He reacts to the world by comparing his perceptions and experiences to his mind's pattern of order and familiarity. Benjy's reality is a matching game: he operates using inflexible relationships linking one word to one object, one emotion to one scenario. Names are rarely replaced with pronouns because names such as Quentin, Caddy, or Jason constitute a person's entire identity. Benjy does not bother discriminating using descriptive details about sex, race, or age. He processes an entire site, perceiving flashes of impressions before he is conscious of the individual elements of a scene. When he hears golfers calling, his extreme literalism kicks into gear, and the cries of "Caddie" draw the only possible response. Dilsey's graveyard only exists when the two blue bottles are sitting on top of the mound; without them, Benjy's rigid pattern of recognition is disrupted. Benjy reacts strongly to novelty and change because he relies on <https://assignbuster.com/delusional-history-escaping-the-past-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

the stability of patterns. Any deviation from this familiarity unleashes turmoil in his mind and upsets him, making him cry or moan. For example, Caddy's first experiment with perfume shocks Benjy's sense of constancy - he detects something awry and it deeply disturbs him. However, he doesn't force the reader to accept his emotional reaction, unlike Quentin and Jason, whose respective shame and bitterness infuse the fiber of their stories, so that those emotions are the only acceptable ones if their memories are to be taken at face value. Benjy does, however, require readers to organize his jumble of memories. Although he can mold random fact and meaning together instantly, we cannot pass off an anarchy of imagery as reality without driving ourselves mad. Once the clutter is controlled, we realize that Benjy's objectivity comes with a cost; the events are too transparent, the narrative too simple, the characters too basic and crude. Benjy's internal compass requires everything he meets to be an unchanging archetype: Caddy is the embodiment of love, Jason the devil incarnate. The lack of subtlety in his worldview makes Benjy's testimony borderline robotic; it is too abrupt, too emotionally impoverished. There is no unique "Benjy context" to help the reader understand the significance of Benjy's memories to Benjy himself. His mind does not expand as his memories increase, nor do his perceptions become more sophisticated. For example, each time he remembers a death, he calls up the same images of buzzards undressing a corpse. He is stuck in an interpretive rut, reliving each memory with the exact sentiments and reactions he felt when it first took place, repeating his past life in the spaces where a normal person would be studying the significance of the present one. Benjy's memories, therefore, make up a storyline that belies the humanity of the tale. His reality is only valid in a <https://assignbuster.com/delusional-history-escaping-the-past-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

world that stands perfectly still, where all experiences have equal value for everyone, but because our world is never static, and because the human consciousness is inherently judgmental, Benjy's impartiality is empty to the reader. Detached "truth", without imagination or a mind actively engaged with reality, is not the kind of truth able to successfully describe the human experience. Quentin's memories also operate on an inescapable cycle. He is trapped in a fantasy world where time is everywhere: in clocks, watches, ticking, and the beating of hearts. Quentin's obsession with the relentlessly advancing linearity of time conflicts with his attempts to retreat from his uncertain reality into a place of predictable tradition. Despite supposedly being the most intelligent member of the family, Quentin is tormented by the prospect of having to act decisively, of facing his destiny as the Compson head without Caddy by his side. All he wants is to fall back into a world that conforms to his ideals without requiring him to lift a finger. Quentin would rather mull over something than act on it, sooner tell a story than participate in it, because he is afraid to make a mistake in the present and mess up the pattern of the past. It is as if withdrawing into memory will slow down the present, and delay the march towards fate. Quentin finds security in the past's stillness, in its strict moral code, in the refuge of Caddy's past purity. Quentin tries to be as minimally involved in his current surroundings as possible. He inhabits a romantic daydream where there are no clocks to push him, where his days aren't numbered, where he can play the hero and make decisions for Caddy instead of pining after her. He is threatened by the constantly shifting modern world, the changing of the guard, the dismissal of his outdated myths and ideals of morality. As he watches, Damuddy, the lone Compson representative of the old, genteel South, dies. Hard-fisted

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Jason replaces Mr. Compson, and Miss Quentin, the lone new-generation Compson, is a shameless bastard who flaunts her promiscuity without a hint of guilt. For Quentin, the changes in his established reality confuse his sense of balance, as Caddy's absence does for Benjy. For both men, "the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest...where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical" (211). As this strange, erratic future consistently presses on Quentin, his thoughts become tormented and jumbled. His identity shifts along with Caddy's, and for the first time in his life he is lost without a pattern to safely and numbly follow in the heady rush of time and movement. Quentin cannot command "the sequence of natural events and their causes" like he can command his memories. Each day brings its own blueprint of probability and circumstance, making Quentin "a gull on an invisible wire attached through space dragged" (123). He yearns for some sort of steadiness and constancy, and becomes fixated on time, on the repetition of beats and ticks that reminds him of the momentary transience but ultimate permanence of the day-to-day norms of his youth. Clocks and watches invade Quentin's narrative, but while these clocks hark back to times past, they also warn of times to come, trapping Quentin in a present suspended between a past he can't return to and a future he is terrified of. The ticking of his watch haunts him even after he breaks the watch against his dresser. Quentin asks the owner of the clock shop whether any of the clocks are correct, but does not want to know what time it is. The inexorable ticking, the infinitesimal movements of moments replacing each other becomes a surge of change that brings Quentin ever-closer to the ultimate calm: death. The doomsday bells and lengthening shadows prophesize Quentin's inevitable night. Ultimately, the permanence and

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immobility of his memories and the control he has over them are what make death so appealing. It is a state that offers no suspense, and is as clear and stable as the past. He would rather face a stagnant certainty than the roaring, active surprises of the future. However, even his attempt to stall time's movement with a self-enforced end ultimately fails, as the ticking, beating, and chiming that tormented him during his lifetime will simply continue on past his death. Quentin's suicide is merely the beginning of time without Quentin. Perhaps Quentin's tragedy is most visible through his quixotic attempts to control a fleeting entity (such as Caddy, or period-specific concepts of morality), to make time permanent before it turns his beloved past into an indistinguishable blur. He wants to preserve the rawness and intensity of his emotions from the moment he first feels them, afraid that his father's cynical analysis of the situation is true: You cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you like this...it is hard believing to think that a love or a sorrow is a bond purchased without design and which matures willy-nilly and is recalled without warning...you come to believe that even [Caddy] was not quite worth despair perhaps. (177-178) Quentin's memories allow him to escape his present and impending future, permitting him to die immersed in the backwaters of time's flowing rush, surrounded by the ghosts and shadows of his own making. Like Benjy, Quentin can only exist in the very specific, inflexible pattern that he creates. Using only his memories, he builds a universe around Caddy that is only operable if every experience in that universe conforms to his designated moral codes. This is only possible through reminiscence, where he can play God and coerce his construal of events to match his standards, the "making of unreality a possibility" (145). Ultimately, Quentin withdraws from <https://assignbuster.com/delusional-history-escaping-the-past-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

truth because he can't keep up with its emotional demands, and instead invents a fantasy past populated by dream characters with only limited characteristics of the actual people. Through this supreme fiction, he comes to understand that his present emotional state and the insignificance of his dogmatic moral code will not allow him to exist peacefully in tune with the new, disgraced Caddy. Ultimately, he finds such comfort in his memories that he decides it might be better for him to live on as a memory, too. In his lifetime, Quentin is already characterized by memories, by shadows. His reminiscences are ghosts of reality: he lives in the past, as an echo of his true, present self, in the constant shadow of the memory of Caddy. Much of his own being is described in terms of shadows: his muted present is a mere shadow of the glory of his youth; he becomes a shadow through suicide. In many ways, his shadow has more personality than he does himself, at one point " mov[ing] almost perceptibly, creeping back inside the door, driving the shadow back into the door," directing itself more actively than Quentin ever will (84). Everywhere he goes, it is dark; there is always something hovering over him (a clock tower? A memory? Death?). He walks on his shadow as he wanders through Cambridge: " trampling my shadow's bones...I walked upon the belly of my shadow" (96). Unlike Benjy, who is oblivious to time, Quentin is so haunted by this palette of lifeless gray that he sees suicide as his only escape. Quentin fuses shadow imagery with memories and visions of water, as though drowning will exorcise the shadows that infested his lifetime, while simultaneously allowing him to become one. The fusion of water and shadow acts as a reconciliation of the two sides to his life's dominant conflict: the fear of progress, and dependence on the ghosts of his past. It is a mutually destructive

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relationship in that while Quentin's shadow, his extra-corporeal soul, sullies the purity of the water, the water is concurrently dragging his soul into an oblivion of mirror-like clarity. Together, the water and the shade conspire to trap Quentin in their doubly tight embrace. Quentin certainly seems to have a demeaning attitude towards his shadow and, by extension, his own weakness and inability to act resolutely rather than be tricked by Caddy's faade of innocent purity (like the water). He fantasizes about drowning his shadow to test death's powers, and then going behind it to his own death, a cowardly follower to the end. He watches the shadow on the river, wanting to push down his uncertainty over Caddy once and for all, musing: My shadow leaning flat upon the water, so easily had I tricked it...if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned, the shadow of the package like two shoes wrapped up lying on the water. Niggers say a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time.

(90)Although water suggests the purification of souls, it only purifies Quentin by sucking him down into nothingness. For such a prolific escapist as Quentin, who escapes reality through memory and runs from drama at home by going to school, water is the final great escape from life into the inescapable permanence of death. Although Narcissa Benbow can try to wash off her indiscretions with a little water, Quentin's memory of Dilsey scouring Caddy's muddy bottom convinces him that the stains of experience are difficult to remove. Rather than try, one should surrender, misdeeds and all, to the oblivion of water, soothing the mind into unconsciousness, smearing thought and sensation, eradicating the necessity for action.

Remembering the tranquility when he and Caddy went to the Branch, their submission to its hypnotic, sleeplike rhythm, Quentin tries through suicide to

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make that remembered peace timeless, as he remembers “ the floating shadow of [Caddy’s] veil”, which will soon be used to cover the shadow of his earthly body (126).