

The importance of
time in the sound and
the fury.



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In Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*[1], time and the past appear as crucial but complex themes. As a novel constructed around past events which have taken place before the time of narration, the past seems to be very much alive within the narration of the three Compson brothers.

However, beneath the surface there is a contrasting sense of the futility of this connection with the past, along with the notion that time waits for no man, leaving those caught up in the past behind. Faulkner's use of a stream of consciousness narrative style allows the passing of time to be expressed differently across the four sections of the novel, suggesting that, although physical time may wait for no man, there is perhaps another sort of time which is experienced differently for each individual.

On the surface, *The Sound and the Fury* appears to revolve around the very notion that the past is neither dead nor past, as the plot is driven entirely by events which took place years prior. For the most part, the present exists solely as a product of a past which the characters either cannot, or will not, leave behind. John-Paul Sartre outlines this notion in his essay "On *The Sound and The Fury*. Time in Work of Faulkner". In it, he suggests that within Faulkner's novel, "The present, nameless and fleeting, is helpless before [the past]. It is full of gaps, and, through these gaps, things of the past, fixed, motionless and silent as judges or glances, comes to invade it"[2]. Certainly, the helplessness of which Sartre speaks appears to define the narratives of all three of the Compson boys, as each is obsessed by the past in different ways. One brother is obsessed with denying it, one obsessed with holding onto it, and the third seems entirely incapable of even understanding the notion of time divisions. With regards to the "gaps"[3] in the present

being “invade[d]”[4] by the past, the entire novel is set across three days, yet through the constant use of flashbacks the entire history of the Compson family is recalled. The reader spends far more time viewing the past than the present, supporting Sartre’s suggestion that the present is “full of gaps”[5], as the present time narration is interjected with the constant re-emergence of the past. Surely, one could argue that if the past was truly dead, it could not appear so apparently and repeatedly throughout the present of the narrative. At the centre of this sense that the past is not past lies the character of Caddy Compson. Even though she runs away long before the time of narration, her presence saturates the entire novel. She is one of the “things of the past”[6] of which Sartre speaks, and she most certainly appears to “invade”[7] the present. She exists to us only through the memories of her three brothers, but these memories of her are so prevalent that Catherine Morley sees fit to refer to Caddy as “the absent heart at the centre of *The Sound and the Fury*”[8]. Indeed, Faulkner himself actually named Caddy Compson his “heart’s darling”, and the original image and inspiration for *The Sound and the Fury*. The very fact that Faulkner constructs an entire novel around a girl whose image exists only in the past epitomizes the overflow of the past into the present, as the entire text seems dedicated to keeping the past alive. Caddy stands as an embodiment of the past and represents the influence it continues to hold over the present. Each of the Compson brothers obsess over Caddy, and her perceived fall from grace, to the extent that their own present appears to be structured around things which have already come to pass. Morley argues that “Caddy Compson’s imprint upon each of the Compson brothers is indelible”[9], reflecting the way in which the past can be seen to irrevocably stain the

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present, bleeding through the barriers between different points in time to blur together the constructs of a chronological timeline.

The section of narrative which most clearly lays focus on the past over the present is that of Benjy Compson. Certainly, the things Benjy sees and hears in the present lead his stream of consciousness to switch seamlessly between events from the past and events from the present. This is evident as Benjy hears present day golfers calling for their golf caddie, which instantly draws Benjy back into memories of his sister as the word is reminiscent of the name ' Caddy'. Furthermore, he stands at his gate in the present day, waiting for Caddy to return home as she used to before disappearing eighteen years earlier, delineating his lack of understanding that she has become a part of his past. Peter Conn emphasizes Benjy's apparent inability to put his memories behind him as he suggests that " the present is reduced to the vanishing point, serving as little more than a transparent theatre scrim through which the past can always be perceived"[10]. Benjy's castration is symbolic of his inability to separate his future from his past, as he is rendered physically incapable of reproduction. He is trapped in a state of timelessness, incapable of moving forward, and the creation of new life presents the possibility of change and the transition from a child-like figure into a father. The fact that his disability stunts this possibility can be seen to be a part of what prevents him from breaking free from this psychological timelessness. According to James L. Roberts " For Benjy, all time blends into one sensuous experience. He makes no distinction between an event that happened only hours ago and one that occurred years ago"[11]. Indeed, Roberts's view draws on the way in which Benjy's

stream of consciousness transitions between different time periods without implicitly informing the reader of these time jumps. Thomas L. McHaney supports and expands on this notion as he suggests that “ The person reading *The Sound and the Fury* for the first time is thus initially hard pressed to tell past from present”[12]. Indeed, Benjy’s mental condition renders him incapable of understanding the passing of time, and through his utilisation as a narrator he allows Faulkner to draw the reader into the same timeless perspective as Benjy.

On the surface, it may appear as though the past is every bit as alive in Quentin’s narration as it seems to be in Benjy’s. Like Benjy, Quentin’s experiences in the present often trigger memories of the past, sending his mind backwards in time. For example, the little Italian girl he meets reminds him so much of his sister Caddy that he comes to refer to her also as ‘ sister’. In actual fact, Quentin seems to view all women as ‘ sister’ figures, emphasizing his preoccupation with Caddy and his desperation to right her wrongs through imprinting on a surrogate sister. Quentin is obsessed with his sister’s past actions, as he unable to accept her sexual ‘ sin’ or lost virginity, and carries this burden along with him even in the present. Throughout his narration, he constantly reminisces on the words of his father, who philosophised that time cures all ills, including the painful memories of Caddy. He becomes desperate to cease the progression of time so that he never has to forget his past with Caddy and the emotions it evoked in him. The idea of the past not necessarily being past is furthered in Quentin’s narration as he recalls more of his father’s words. He laments how “ Father said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being

clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life” (71). To Quentin, this opens up the possibility of reclaiming his past by destroying the divisions of a chronological timeline.

In contrast to Quentin and his battle to hold onto the past, the character of Jason Compson at first appears to be intent on denying its very existence. He seems to live solely in the present, with his motivation and attention to detail being rooted in his ploys to cheat others for his own short term gain.

However, contrary to his desire to disregard his history, it actually manages to color the person he is in the present. He is, much like his two brothers, obsessed with Caddy, only the obsession is of a different kind. Unlike Benjy, who yearns for his sister to return to him, and Quentin, who desperately wishes to save Caddy from her moral and sexual downfall, Jason blames Caddy for all of his and his family’s misfortunes, carrying his bitterness over the past around with him in the present. In his eyes, Caddy’s sexual and moral discrepancies in the past lost him a position at Herbert Head’s bank, leaving him without ambition for the future, and without anything but resentment for his past and those who were a part of it. More than this, Quentin seems unable to stop himself from seeing incarnations of the past in the present. This is particularly evident as Caddy’s daughter, Miss Quentin, becomes a target for Jason’s cruelty as she appears to embody the same sexuality as her mother, leading Jason to associate her with his past. Gene D. Phillips highlights the redirection of his wrath from Caddy to her daughter as he states that “ In the intervening years Jason has cruelly transferred his contempt and hostility for his sister to the motherless and fatherless girl Caddy abandoned”[13]. Even as he tries to leave the past behind, he

attempts to control his sister's sexuality by controlling the product of Caddy's illegitimate affair.

Given the importance of the past to the central characters, it is certainly tempting to argue that the past in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is anything but dead. However, it could alternatively be deemed that the past is dead, and what lives on is the family's psychological inability to accept this fact. Michael Cotsell supports this notion as he argues that "In Faulkner's contemporary novels, there is the repeated sense of the persistence of the past and yet its actual irrelevance"[14]. Indeed, this is particularly evident in Quentin's narrative. As previously suggested, Quentin certainly appears to be trapped by his past, allowing it to consume his present. However, it could also be argued that he is in actuality a character who actively fights to keep the past alive, only to ultimately suffer an inevitable defeat. This defeat is symbolized by his attempt at destroying his watch. He tears the hands from the clock face in an ultimately futile bid to enter a state of timelessness, only to find himself constantly haunted by the phantom sound of time ticking away. This signifies the unhindered forward flow of time, as it moves on to leave the past in the past, and epitomizes the helplessness of any man attempting to keep the past alive. This supports Cotsell's idea of the past being ultimately irrelevant, as no matter how far Quentin sinks into the memories of his past, he will never be able to go back. His attempts at stopping time are perhaps as futile as he and Benjy's insistence on desperately clinging to the past, as the past is reduced simply to a shadow cast over the present. His suicide is his final attempt to quell the passage of time, as only by removing himself from reality can he stifle the ticking of the

clock, both literally and figuratively. His declaration that he cannot live in both “ Massachusetts and Mississippi” (147) signifies the realisation that, if he wishes to keep himself from losing his hold on the past, his only option is to die. His decision to take his own life is an action which, ironically, solidifies his position as a part of the past as he removes himself from both the present and the future.

Caddy may be the heart of the story, but it is important to note that she is the only main character who is not given a chance to narrate. If Caddy stands as an embodiment of the past, then the implication of this is that the past actually is dead in any physical or self-sustaining way. Her memory is kept alive through the memories and narratives of her three brothers. The view of Caddy varies greatly between the narrative sections, as we see her through the different lenses of each of her brother’s streams of consciousness. The Caddy as portrayed by Benjy is an idealized image and the subject of his longing, which stands in stark contrast to the antagonistic Caddy described by Jason. Indeed, we never see an entirely unbiased view of Caddy, or of the Compson family past in general. This appears to contradict Sartre’s notion of the present being “ helpless”[15] before the past as the past is manipulated and reworked based on the attitude of the present narrator. In this sense, Caddy represents the death of the past as her memory is kept alive only in the minds of her brothers. In addition to existing as a symbol of the Compson family’s past, the character of Caddy holds a wider significance as she can also be seen to represent the decline of the American South. Her non-marital loss of virginity is symbolic of the corruption of Southern values, and her failure to reconcile with her family

suggests that these outdated Southern values have no place in a modern world. Perhaps for Faulkner, the past of the American South is as dead as the glorious past of the Compson family.

Faulkner's use of an omniscient and impartial narrator in the final section effectively removes the reader from the Compson boys' streams of consciousness and reinstates the existence of chronological time. This is emphasized through the character of Dilsey, who acts as a sort of anchor with regards to time, and on whom the final section is largely centered. Terrell L. Tebbetts argues that " Dilsey knows what time it is. How different she is from Quentin and his lamented conviction that, since no clocks can tell time correctly, there is no time"[16]. Indeed, the action of telling time and the appearance of clocks and watches appears as a common motif in the narrations of Quentin and Dilsey, but it appears in two very different ways. As mentioned previously, Quentin appears to battle against the time shown by the clock, constantly trying to intervene or escape from its relentless passing. In contrast, Dilsey is the only character who measures time using its physical, chronological timeline. The omniscient narrator draws attention to the clock in the kitchen, and notes the fact that when the clock strikes, Dilsey is unquestioningly aware that it is 8 o'clock. She readily accepts this to be true, without attempting to fight against time itself. It is not only the passing of time which Dilsey can see clearly, but also the passing of the Compson family's own history. She is not blinded by her longing to course correct, her insistence to deny their history or an inability to recognize the division between past and present, and this allows her to function as a mediator between external time and the internal time of the family she has

been with since long before the novel's point of narration begins. She recognizes chronology, and understands that the Compson family name is fading further into a time gone by. This is evident as she is seen to remark "I've seed de first en de last...I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (253). Her distinction between the beginning and the ending of these events delineates her ability to separate the past, the present and the future, and to accept the temporality of all things. Just like Caddy, and then Quentin, the remaining family members will inevitably fade into the past also.

Perhaps then, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* portrays the past as being both dead and alive simultaneously by splitting the passing of time into two different types. Firstly, there is the external passing of time, encompassing the physical reality around us and its chronological order. In this timeline, the past is the past. Time flows forward constantly, never stopping to allow the past to catch up regardless of attempts at human intervention. On the other hand, there is the internal passing of time, which exists within the minds and thoughts of individual characters. This timeline is entirely different to the former, with the past and the present becoming less clearly defined.

Stephanie K. Evers underlines the distinction between the internal and external passing of time within Benjy's narrative as she argues that "Certainly, natural time passes; that is, Benjy ages and the world around him changes. However, Benjy does not recognize the divisions of this time"[17]. Benjy, in many ways, achieves that inner timelessness sought so desperately by Quentin. Quentin is unable to forget the passing of time while Benjy is unable to recognize it to begin with as a consequence of his mental disability. Therefore, it is through his state of mind that Benjy appears to '

defeat' time in a way that Quentin, who is of a sounder mental state, could not. This emphasizes the importance of internal time, and the way in which it flows differently for each individual person without any reliance on external time. The natural time to which Evers refers passes the same for all of the narrators, it is the way they experience this time psychologically which varies. Indeed, Evers underpins a separation between physical time and psychological time as notes that, in the final section of the novel, " the narrative moves forwards chronologically. The chief reason it can do this is because, unlike Benjy, Quentin and Jason, the final narrative includes no one's memories or feelings"[18]. In other words, without the interplay of internal time in the novel's final section, Faulkner manages to juxtapose a panoramic and impartial view of time passing and the Compson family history against the intricate pattern of past and present put forward in the first three sections. Mr Compson emphasizes the importance of internal time over external time as he tells Quentin " you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's" (63). In other words, time can be measured in more ways than via the clock, as internal time is tailored to the individual, passing differently from person to person.

In conclusion, the past in *The Sound and the Fury* appears to be both dead and alive, as time itself seems to pass in two separate but coexisting ways. The external, physical time of the real world passes chronologically, leaving past events behind to make way for the present. This external time is central to the final section of the novel, as the omniscient narrator is unaffected by his own sense of time, allowing us to see an impartial view of the physical

passing of time in relation to the Compson family and their history. However, the stream of conscious narrative style emphasizes the passing of internal time over external time as the three Compson boys narrate from their own deeply skewed perceptions of how the past relates to the present. Faulkner successfully epitomizes the subjective nature of this internal time, as each brother gives us an entirely different portrayal of the same timeline.

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