

Evidence of authorial design in william faulkner's 'the sound and the fury'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A sense of 'authorial design' in William Faulkner's 'The Sound And The Fury' does not make itself apparent until the second section of the book, narrated by the suicidal Quentin, although the seeds of this design are planted in the earliest pages of the novel, in the first section narrated by Benjy, in the form of hints at future events to be foreshadowed. However, we are not immediately aware of their presence or their effect until certain elements within Benjy's confused narrative are resurrected, embellished, and built-upon in later sections of the story. It is only with the power of hindsight, looking back on the early parts of the narrative, that we realize this sense of design and intelligent structure was there all along. The initial evidence of this is only small, and is of no great overall importance with regard to the narrative, but it serves the grander purpose of linking together the events depicted in the first, third, and last sections of the book by not only allowing us to piece them together in a chronological way, but also by allowing us to discover for ourselves the causal chain of events that led to their occurrence in the first place. "Aint you going to help me find that quarter so I can go to the show tonight," Luster asks Benjy in the opening passages of the novel. Later, not having found it, he asks Jason for a quarter, to which Jason replies: "I thought Dilsey was going to get a quarter from Frony for you." Luster says she did, and admits that he lost it. He eventually receives the quarter from Caddy's daughter Quentin, and there is no further mention of it until the third section of the novel, which takes place the day before the first section, in which Luster again asks Jason for a quarter so he can go to the show; he does not receive it. This is merely a trivial plot point, save for what it reveals about the destructive and occasionally malevolent nature of Jason's character when he burns the tickets to the show that Luster wants to go to, <https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

rather than giving them to Luster. It is akin to the moment when his father and his namesake orders Benjy's castration and, if not as severe as that event, it is at least more illogical and unreasonable, even though Jason does not see it that way. However, even with its lack of narrative relevance to the novel as a whole, this plot point underscores and upholds the design of the novel in two ways. First, as a purely structural element, it links together two separate sections of the story - the first and the third - and thus it forms a bridge across the chasm of Quentin's section, so we may work out for ourselves the order of continuity in which these events take place. Second, as a more thematically-resonant element, it allows us to witness Jason's display of harsh behavior and thus it allows us to draw the connection between him and his father. That he carries his father's name is not, in itself, evidence of design - but we suspect that a designer is at work when Caddy's daughter Quentin shares a name with Caddy's brother, and when Benjy, who was once Maury, shared - like Quentin - a name with his uncle. This is evidence of design because it is too coincidental to not be deliberate; and, if it is deliberate, then it must serve a purpose. That purpose is to prompt the reader to look for reasons as to why these characters might share a name and to what those names might signify - and ultimately that purpose is to compare and contrast the individuals who share that name. It is this technique of juxtaposition and mimicry - of contrasting scenes with later scenes and one individual with another individual, and likewise of comparing scenes and individuals - that suggests a design to the novel, with a grand purpose to that design: namely, to illustrate the reasons behind the downfall of the Compsons without explicitly illustrating them. We do not realize that the reasons for their downfall have been illustrated for us until these scenes

<https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

and individuals are compared and contrasted in hindsight, so we may then go back and evaluate the earlier elements in order to see the cause of the decay: its instigator, Caddy. Consider Benjy's first recollection in his section of the novel: "Caddy took her dress off and threw it on the bank. Then she didn't have on anything but her bodice and drawers, and Quentin slapped her and she slipped and fell down into the water." In a single paragraph, the events of the entire novel are set in motion. Caddy, at age seven or eight, first asks Versh to take her dress off for her - a foreshadowing of the emerging promiscuity that will ultimately bring about her undoing - and Quentin warns Versh not to do it - likewise, a sign of his over-protectiveness of his sister, which comes to the fore when he slaps her for taking her dress off. Ultimately, too, it is this over-protectiveness that will bring about his downfall - that is, his suicide. But as they are all children at this time, and as we witness this even through the eyes of Benjy, who is unconstrained by time and by conceptions of ordinary morality, we do not realize until much later, when we reconsider this passage detailing the interaction of the siblings, that the seeds of their destruction were planted from the very beginning. While the final section of the novel is narrated from an omniscient, third-person point-of-view, the non-chronological order of the first three sections must be arranged in such an order by that same omniscience, for it gives the story a pace by which we move from disorder to order in the same way we move in a more conventional narrative from conflict to resolution, and thus, though it is not made explicit on a purely narrative level, the novel is nevertheless imbued with an overwhelming sense of fatalistic inevitability. This inevitability, then, gives rise to an equal sense of hopelessness, which in turn gives rise to the essence of tragedy:

<https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

judging from the progression of the novel's disorder into order, we know that an ending to the Compson family's legacy is in sight, and that it is not at all pleasant " I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin," Dilsey says, portentously. This inevitability is brought about by the arrangement and structuring of the four sections of the novel: although the narrative progression is not depicted in chronological order, the thematic progression certainly is. With the central theme of the novel being an exploration of the constraints of time, there is a forward progression in the movement from a completely disorganized and random perception of time in Benjy's section, to a more ordered but still confused perception of time in Quentin's section, to a largely ordered and only occasionally disrupted perception of time in Jason's section, and finally to a supremely ordered and undisrupted depiction of time in the final section. It is almost as if we have a ' God's eye view' of the narrative, beginning in the mind of Benjy and slowly pulling back to reveal an increasingly more objective portrait of the Compsons and, more specifically, of the absent Caddy. This suggests design by way of a seemingly random but essentially logically-ordered arrangement of the narrative structure in such a way as to ensure that the true subject of the story - Caddy Compson - always remains at the core of the narrative, as its focus. Nowhere in the story is this sense of inevitability more powerful than in Quentin's section on June Second, 1910. More than any of the other sections, Quentin's section operates in a similar way to the novel as a whole, but on a microcosmic level - it employs the same structure as the entire novel, but condenses that structure into a single chapter. From the moment we realize that Quentin is the narrator of this section, with the resentful words "[Jesus] had no sister" - which imply a kind of over-protectiveness toward a sister, <https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

such as that we have already witnessed in Benjy's section - we suspect how his story ends: with his suicide. We do not receive confirmation of this, however, unless we put together the pieces of what we already know, for there is a technique at work here, as follows. Roskus does not mention Quentin by name in Benjy's section when he tells Dilsey that "Aint the sign of [bad luck] been here for folks to see fifteen years now" - but nevertheless, there is the implication of some terrible occurrence in the Compson household that took place about fifteen years ago. Moreover, there is the implication that someone died - "Dying aint all," says Roskus - and there is also the implication (by way of the symbolic deathly screech of the "squinch owl") that more bad luck is yet to come. A sense of design is made evident when Benjy's story is immediately followed by Quentin's story, dated "June Second, 1910" just over fifteen years before the events preceding Benjy's section on "April Seventh, 1928." We know, then, by way of Roskus' earlier comments, that something of great resonance takes place in this chapter, and, several paragraphs into it, we know that whatever it is, it happens to Quentin. Indeed, when Quentin recalls how he held Caddy at knifepoint and told her he could kill her and then kill himself, we realize that this is exactly what he will do, for Caddy has lost her virginity and so the idealized version of her that Quentin once held dear is now 'dead' - is gone forever: therefore, there is nothing left for him to do but to kill himself, as he earlier promised. But simple foreshadowing is not the mere gimmicky end-purpose of the novel's design; it is simply the purpose of this section of the novel in order to underscore the story's overarching theme of time. The sluglines at the beginning of each section indicate a specific but overall jumbled timeframe, and, being conditioned to more conventionally-structured works of fiction, we

<https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

immediately attempt to impose this narrative onto a more solid timeframe in our mind's eye. With our failure to do this in Benjy's section, we realize that he exists in a world free from time's constraints, and with our successful ability to do this in Quentin's section, we realize that he exists in a world trapped by time's constraints. This comparison and contrast between two sets of two of the three brothers, whose respective sections immediately precede or follow another's - that is, between Benjy and Quentin, and between Quentin and Jason - gives the novel its overall sense of design, which then impacts upon and shapes its central theme. The purpose of the design of the overall novel - as opposed to simply any one section of the novel - is to paint a portrait of an individual who exists outside of time; not Benjy, who naturally exists outside of time, and not Quentin, who forces himself to exist outside of time, and not Jason, who lives in the past and exists outside of the present time, but rather it is a portrait of Caddy, not as a girl but as an ideal which, by its very nature as a purely metaphysical thing, must exist outside of time. But this ideal can only exist outside of time if exactly the same idealized version of Caddy is held by the three brothers, with no differing opinions on their perception of that ideal. For the first two brothers, this is embodied in the notion of castration. Benjy is castrated because, it is implied, he attempts to rape a girl - not a specific girl, but an anonymous one; yet he knows he has lost something, and the loss he feels is equated with the sense of loss he felt when he first saw Caddy after she lost her virginity. Likewise, after Caddy has lost her virginity, Quentin tells his father he wishes he was a eunuch so he would not think about sex (that is, with his sister). Consider also that in Quentin's section of the novel, Benjy pulls at Caddy's dress when he senses she is no longer a virgin while, in <https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

Benjy's section of the novel, Quentin urges Caddy to keep her dress on as she climbs the tree - a symbol of temptation, the scent of which torments Quentin. Only by way of this contrast between the two brothers can Caddy be portrayed as an ideal: Benjy has lost something he did not want to lose, Quentin wishes to lose something he does not want to have, but both brothers have lost an idealized version of their beloved sister and it is a completely involuntary loss that neither of them can reclaim. Caddy could easily have been perceived as an ideal by each of the brothers, but she could not have been perceived as the same kind of ideal by both brothers unless this specific design and structure was employed to separate their stories, to plant seeds in one that are sown in the other, to compare and contrast in order to salvage the overall portrait of the girl and of her idealized self. This comparison and contrast between the two brothers comes to a head in the third section of the novel, narrated by Jason. Jason is a combination of the two brothers - like Quentin he is emotionally dead, although physically animated; like Benjy he has lost many things, but is trying desperately to reclaim something, anything. We would not understand this connection between the three brothers were it not for the specific design of the comparison/contrast structure imposed on the narrative, that gradually distances us from the wholly subjective perspective held by Benjy and moves us toward the largely objective perspective held by Jason. How is it, then, that Jason is able to hold exactly the same kind of idealized version of Caddy in his mind, as held by both Benjy and Quentin, if he does not perceive her as an object of desire, as they do? Perhaps it is because neither Benjy nor Quentin actually perceive her as an object of desire, but rather all three brothers view their sister as someone they have idealized as a person who,

<https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

in her absence, brings about a sense of loss, and who, in her presence, is capable of negating that loss. Neither Benjy nor Quentin nor Jason specifically want Caddy back, at least not as an individual person; but they simply want Caddy back because when she lost her virginity, when she left behind a child, and when she left altogether, she took something away from each of the brothers' lives - and it is that something that they each seek to reclaim. Caddy is simply the embodiment of that something; she is the common element of loss that cannot be regained; that is why she becomes, for each of them, an unattainable ideal. Consider, finally, the closing passage of the novel: evidence, in narrative form, of the design as outlined above. "Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on" - in the same way we might read the novel as both a forward-moving narrative and as a backward-looking exercise in the significance of hindsight. Now consider the final sentence: "Post and tree, window and doorway and signboard [were] each in [their] ordered place" - in much the same way the different sections of the novel are each in their ordered place, with the same structure as this observation, from the disordered size and height of the post and tree, to the more ordered placement of the window and doorway, to the supremely ordered ability to convey information of the signpost. Indeed, this is typical of the entire final section of the novel, which is essentially a summation, via Reverend Shegog's speech, of the history of the decaying Compson family thus far - as if the omniscient designer were commenting and passing judgment on the events that have taken place to lead up to this moment; for what is time, but a measurement of the present against the past? - and therein lies the evidence of design. That the quality of events and characters within a novel can be measured, and that the structure of <https://assignbuster.com/evidence-of-authorial-design-in-william-faulkners-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

such a novel would invite readers to measure these things for themselves, suggests that those events have been orchestrated for a specific purpose, and those characters have been imbued with specific qualities and histories, and together they have been structured in such a way as would not only imply but would necessitate an intelligent design to the novel, in order to give the contents therein some kind of valuable thematic meaning.