

# William Faulkner's Sound and the Fury essay sample



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*The Sound and the Fury* was published around the time of the onset of the Great Depression in America towards the ending of 1920's. It was Faulkner's fourth novel, first major critical success, a literary masterpiece, and often considered to be the best among all of Faulkner's considerable fictional output. The novel's title is based on one of the most famous utterances of Shakespeare, "Life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Its implications of sheer evanescence and futility of man's doings and goings on are easily recognizable. "Sound and Fury" is indeed a phrase that could be a fitting title for any number of novels or autobiographies, because insignificance seems to be the essence of human existence, and Faulkner's tale of a disintegrating aristocratic family set in the American South during the early part of the twentieth century perhaps deserves it as it as much as any.

William Faulkner was born in 1897. The Faulkners moved to Oxford, Mississippi, when William was a very young child, and it was here that William Faulkner would spend most of his life. His great grandfather, who had himself been written a piece of romantic fiction, was William Faulkner's namesake and a source of inspiration. Faulkner did not pursue his education too far and had a brief stint in Canadian branch of the Royal Air Force. After the ending of the First World War, Faulkner earned a living by doing odd jobs, but gradually started building up a career as a writer. He could manage to publish a book of poems in 1924. At this time, he was noticed by a then well-known author called Sherwood Anderson, who motivated him to become a full-fledged writer of fiction.

The second half of the 1920's saw Faulkner publishing his early novels. In his third novel *Sartoris*, Faulkner introduced the fictitious countryside of American South, Yoknapatawapha, which is largely based on his own province and would feature in several of his novels including *The Sound and the Fury*. The year of Great Depression also saw the publishing of *The Sound and the Fury*, which would soon become his first major success. In the same year he also married his childhood sweetheart. Faulkner went on to write several masterpieces and has been a recipient of both Pulitzer and Nobel prizes. He died in 1962.

*The Sound and the Fury* is a difficult stream-of-consciousness novel, yet for all the patience that is required to read it, it makes a powerful and evocative narrative. The novel does not have much of a plot as such, in the sense of a conventional clearly evolving storyline, but one of its dominant themes may be said to be the incestuous obsession of the three of the Compson brothers for their sister Caddy:

Caddy's head was on Father's shoulder. Her hair was like fire, and little points of fire were in her eyes, and I went and Father lifted me into the chair too, and Caddy held me. She smelled like trees. (Faulkner 9)

Such subject matter may indeed seem to be rather odd and off-putting to our modern sensibilities, one wonders whether the three brothers, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, did not have anything better to do than think and talk about their sister, and also whether we may not have anything better to do than read their pathetic story.

*The Sound and the Fury* is not exactly an inspiring novel with an uplifting theme, neither is it meant to be one. It is indeed a pathetic tale, or a tale of morbid pathos, tracing the decline of a noble Southern family that loses all its nobility over the course of long years and decades that the story spans across. The family is descended from the U. S. Civil War hero General Compson, but there is nothing noble or heroic about it now, it just presents a complexly interwoven picture of thick and insipid morass. However, this book is not at all about substance, it is about form and technique.

As far as the story of *The Sound and the Fury* is concerned, there is nothing to it. There is no unfolding drama, or any events that build up on one another, just many discrete episodes such as Quentin's suicide, or Caddie's unwanted pregnancy, or Benjy's castration. There are occasional insights, but it is difficult to comprehend what they mean:

Because 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. (Faulkner 85)

Like Salvador Dali's paintings which seem to be obsessed about time, presenting clocks in all kinds of warped distortions, Faulkner's novel displays a haunting and rather melancholic obsession with time, perceptions, memories and experiences. There seems to be a vast experiment going on with our conception and perception of time; it is intriguing at times, but the essence of Faulkner's peculiar brand of stream-of-consciousness, nonlinear narrative technique proves to be very elusive. However, a heavy mood of lackluster pessimism oozes through the entire novel, seeming to say that life

is nothing but a meaningless series of images, experiences and memories, as indeed it would be the case if it were nothing more than “ a tale told by an idiot.”

The story gives off a sense that the Compson family is now but a faint shadow of its former glory and greatness. But the blame seems to be entirely thrown on time, as if entropy is an inevitability with the world we live in, and nothing could be done about it. If that were indeed so, there would have been no progress possible in the first place. But even when the American economy was crumbling away at the height of depression, President Roosevelt's ambitious New Deal program was initiated to put America back on track, and in fact, to take it to new heights. America soon emerged as world's foremost superpower. *The Sound and Fury* lacks the punch of a New Deal. It is just about depression, disintegration, deterioration and defeat, and nothing comes out of it at all in the end.

Like the four Gospels of the Bible, this novel is divided into four sections, narrated by different persons, the three brothers and the voice of the author himself in the last section, with many common episodes between them, though presented from differing points of view. But unlike the Bible, this is a story of perdition, unredeemed to the end. There is no saving grace, nor any possibility of hope, nor any hint of greatness and glory. Faulkner seems to be ruthlessly bent upon capturing “ the way to dusty death,” (a Shakespearean phrase appearing in the same passage as the line quoted at the beginning of this essay.) There can be innumerable approaches to portray the way to dusty death, but Faulkner does it in a particularly brutal and sullen fashion.

Of the three brothers, Quentin, although educated in Harvard, commits suicide very early on. For what reasons, it is not clear, although it has to do very much with his obsession with his sister and her sin. Benjy is a mentally retarded person. Jason is neither mad, nor retarded, nor commits suicide, but is embittered and petty-minded. In the end, Faulkner seems to imply that the attitudes and states of these three brothers are the only valid responses possible to human condition that is so much embroiled in the relentless flow of time.

*The Sound and the Fury* has over time become one of the enduring classics of literature, and the primary reason for this does not seem to be the dispiriting content of the story, but because, as the Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of literature puts it:

With *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner for the first time incorporated several challenging and sophisticated stylistic techniques, including interior monologues and stream-of-consciousness narrative. (Faulkner, backcover)

The first part of the book, which is Benjy's view of things, has particularly drawn critical acclaim. Benjy, being an imbecile (a down's syndrome patient), has a particularly disjointed pattern of perception, and it goes to Faulkner's credit to portray the world from whose mind would be working on an entirely different tack from that of a normal person's. However to follow Benjy's line of thinking may be tedious to follow for most, and in one of the initial unfavorable reviews of *The Sound and the Fury*, subsequent to its publication in 1929-30, Clifton Fadiman dismissed Benjy's chapter as too much of a good thing to listen to "on hundred pages of an imbecile's

simplified sense perceptions and monosyllabic gibberings." Fadiman was also of the opinion that Quentin and Jason did not have characters interesting enough to spur the readers follow the " ramifications of their minds and memories."

Another critic, John L Longley Jr., has argued that the dominant theme of the novel is love — love between members of the family, and how they are able or not able to give that love freely. He perceives the love of Caddy, Mr. Compson, and Dilsey, the matriarch of the black servant family, as " pure, unselfish, and whole-hearted." Perhaps, if so, this love could be seen as the sole redeeming feature of an otherwise grim tale of decay and degradation.

#### References:

Faulkner, William. " The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text with Faulkner's Appendix." 1992. New York : Modern Library Edition