

Who howls hardest?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The suicidal eldest, the special needs middle child, and the youngest, incapable of love: these are the three Compson brothers, each haunted by their own demons and howling for everything they have lost. In his novel *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner tells his tale from the perspective of these three brothers, all of whom cannot escape the demons of their past. These brothers all cry for something, but are they all justified in doing so? In some instances they are, but most of the time they are simply trapped in their own small worlds, unable to see the bigger picture where what they howl for means nothing. Quentin mourns the loss of his sister's innocence and agonizes over being the cause of losing half of Benjy's pasture to pay for his schooling. Benjy cries for Caddy, the only one who truly ever showed him compassion, and for the lack of order in the Compson's deteriorating lives. Jason condemns Caddy for the loss of a bank job he never received, and holds a bitter grudge that leaves no room for love. Although the three brothers all howl, mostly about the sister they are obsessed with, the only ones truly justified in doing so are Benjy, because Caddy truly cared about him and was the only one who showed him love and compassion, and sometimes Quentin because of the financial trouble he put his family in.

Out of all three Compson brothers, Benjy leads the hardest life. He is trapped inside his body, unable to speak and unable to judge. Because of his inability to judge, he is unique in that he is completely and purely innocent throughout the novel. Nobody really pays Benjy much attention, except Caddy. Most of Benjy's section is memories from the past because Caddy is in his past. Caddy is always with him when no one else wants to be, saying, "I like to take care of him. Don't I. Benjy," (Faulkner 63). She even acts as his

protector, like when Jason cuts up Benjy's dolls and Caddy tries to fight him, crying " I'll slit his gizzel," (65). Caddy is so important to him because to his family, he seems more of an afterthought than a legitimate member of the clan. He is usually pawned off on the hired help because the perpetually sick Caroline Compson cannot be bothered to raise her own children. Roskus, Dilsey's husband, even criticizes, " raising a child not to know its own mammy's name," (Faulkner 31). Jason also does not care for Benjy, detachedly referring to him as " Ben" and viewing him more as a burden than a brother, threatening that when Mrs. Compson dies, " I'll sure have him on number seventeen that night," (222). Without Caddy to protect him and care for him, Benjy is all alone on the Compson estate, forever following golfers on the other side of the fence who scream " caddy", hoping for his disowned sister who will never return.

Benjy clearly has the most reason to howl, but Quentin has moments where his fervid howls are also justified. Throughout his section he is haunted by shadows which represent " all I had felt suffered taking visible form," (170). He continuously remembers scenes from the past that make him feel guilty, like his parents apprising him, " we have sold Benjy's pasture so that Quentin may go to Harvard," which haunts Quentin as he repeats, " a brother to you. Your little brother," (94). In addition to the guilt he feels for the financial burden he is to his family, he is also obsessed with Caddy and her lost virginity. He is maudlin and feels responsible, as if he could have somehow stopped it, which he never could have. He repeats, " I have committed incest," throughout his entire section, trying to somehow justify her pregnancy in his own twisted way (77). He tries to intimidate her baby's

father to protect her, but even fails at that, causing him even more pain. Quentin is fixated on his sister, and all of his memories circulate around her and her marriage and pregnancy. This haunts him, but the bottom line is he is not responsible for Caddy's actions and could not have stopped her no matter what he did. Although his rambling about incest and the guilt he feels about Caddy getting pregnant is ridiculous, the guilt he feels for the loss of Benjy's beloved pasture is legitimate. He feels like a failure, a burden on his family just so that he could attend a prestigious school and this fact prompts him to incessantly repeat " Harvard my Harvard boy Harvard Harvard" (92). In the end, his demons prove to be too much for him to handle, even though not all of them are warranted, and he commits suicide.

Although Benjy and Quentin are mostly justified in their howling, Jason elicits no sympathy from the reader with his cries. The opening line of his section is " once a bitch always a bitch," and this hateful tone continues for the rest of his narrative (180). He is stuck in the past, unable to move on from the bank job he never received Caddy's husband because she had an illegitimate child. Because of this, Jason feels that he deserves compensation for the job he never had, and therefore feels justified to be cruel to everyone around him, especially his niece Miss Quentin and Caddy herself. He treats them cruelly, stealing their money for his own gain because " neither of them had had entity or individuality for him for ten years; together they merely symbolized the job in the bank of which he had been deprived before he ever got it," (306). Jason often makes himself out to be a martyr, sacrificing his freedom to support his family, when in reality he is actually stealing their money and adding to the deterioration of the Compson estate. He is a huge

contributor to the Compson family's downfall, and yet he pities himself, uttering phrases like, " Well I can stand a lot," and " I don't expect much," (232, 220). He seemingly tries to get the readers to side with his tendentious narrative and agree that his life is terrible, but he is actually the reason his life is bad. He never tries to get a better job like the bank job and he steals money from the women in his family whom he despises: since he chooses to live with a grudge that consumes his every thought, Jason Compson has no justification for howling.

Each of the three Compson brothers lives a life where their past controls their present, and each cries for these events that haunt them, but only Benjy and sometimes Quentin are truly justified in doing so. For Benjy, he has every reason in the world to cry: he is trapped in a family of self-centered egotists, unable to speak for himself and forever waiting for the sister who showed him compassion who will never come. Benjy is truly the only innocent Compson, guilty of nothing but being born with a disability. Although not completely defensible, Quentin's caterwauls also hold some merit. The cost of him going to Harvard was what initially put the Compson family in financial trouble and was the reason they sold Benjy's pasture, causing him to lose a lot of freedom. The guilt he holds for this is warranted because of the detriment it caused his family, even if he is not completely responsible for it. His guilt over Caddy's pregnancy, however, is unnecessary. He believes he could have prevented it, yet there was absolutely nothing he could have done. In the end, the inescapable shadow of his past was too much for him to handle, and he committed suicide. The only brother without reason to howl is Jason, who harbors a bitter grudge

against his sister for the bank job he never received. All he does is steal from his sister, mother, and niece in his section and does nothing to better the family. His howls are in no way justified. The Compson family has more than their fair share of demons, but they mostly cause these demons themselves. The only two people who have the right to cry for their situations is Benjy and Quentin who are more victim than sinner in the novel.

Works Cited  
Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.