



The Sound and the Fury and spiritual decline

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ABSTRACT:

In contrast to Jason's neurosis and Quentin's psychosis is Dilsey's sense of temporal order and the grounding that she derives from her religion. In the Quentin section we had seen that time was the mausoleum of all hope and desire and the brothers are all caught up in a past in which Caddy had not lost her innocence and virginity and betrayed the family name. Dilsey in contrast thinks not in terms of the past but a redemptive future in which Christ will come and redeem believers all from their fragmented existences and bring them back to his abode in Paradise- a future she looks forward to in contrast to all the ruin and fragments and bondage to the past that Jason and Quentin experience.

Keywords: Faulkner; Quentin; Jason; Caddy; Innocence; Purity; Loss

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* relates the tale of the decline of the Compson family which largely revolves around the loss of Caddy's virginity and her subsequent ill fated marriage to save her family name. It is related through a series of four narratives each trying to cope with the loss of Caddy and her virginity. What is apparent is the spiritual loss that accompanies this obsession with Caddy and virginity and the lack of a religious ground to lend a spiritual foundation to the family which exacerbates the loss and leads to a profound spiritual absence and loss which leads to the decline of the family. Dilsey, their African helper by contrast has a spiritual foundation in being a Christian who still attends church and we can see the contrast between the alcoholism, thievery, psychosis and neurosis of the Compson family

and the contrasting value and faith that Dilsey derives from her religion.

The Sound and the Fury is a play on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* which ends with *Macbeth's* soliloquy on life being a tale of sound and fury signifying nothing. Indeed like *Macbeth* Faulkner's tale begins being told by an idiot Benjy, who because he is an idiot and retarded does not add judgement to his perceptions and is a pure register of a series of impressions. The most significant of his impressions is that Caddy smelt like trees- a reference to the time she gave herself to Dalton Ames, loses her virginity and becomes subsequently pregnant- marking the decline of the Compson family as their family name is tarred.

"I give it [watch] to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools." June Second, 1910, pg. 76

Quentin mentions his father's gift of a watch to him- the mausoleum of all hope and desire- and this largely marks the tone of the novel. The tone of desolation and spiritual defeat without redemption and hope is a trait that marks each of the narratives and the profound indication of the loss that accompanies Caddy's loss of virginity and loss of innocence. However a contrast to this absence of hope and despairing tone is to be found in Dilsey's



narrative where her religion gives her a sense of hope and order to her life- as she says- she sees the beginning and the ending the first and the last. It is Dilsey's Christianity which grounds her and allows her to make sense of the world around her as well as maintain her sanity- which the psychotic Quentin and the neurotic Jason are not in possession of.

"Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. *I have committed incest I said Father it was I*" June Second, 1910, pg. 79

Quentin is a psychotic who is convinced that he has committed incest with Caddy because he is so caught up with the Compson family name and honour that he imagines if the act of sexual invasion were committed by himself the Compson name would be intact and there would be none of the loss and decline of the family name that accompanies Caddy's loss of virginity. The imagined incest is Quentin's way of coping with his inability to stop Caddy from her sexual licentiousness and loss of innocence and tarring of the family name. Quentin is a psychotic who is caught up with ideals of tradition and family honour and as such is psychologically damaged by Caddy's betrayal of the Compson family by being sexually licentious and thus withdraws into psychosis by imagining it was he who carried out Caddy's sexual degradation. It is his ineffective attempt to defend her maiden honour which leads Quentin to withdraw into this psychosis.

Purity [specifically, virginity] is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy" June Second, 1910, pg. 116

In this quote we see what is truly damaging Quentin- it is Caddy's loss of virginity and sexual betrayal of the family by tainting the

family name. In this quote Quentin attempts to rationalize Caddy's betrayal by indicating that it is nature that has betrayed them not Caddy but we know it is a weak rationalization as it is clearly Caddy's wanton sexual licentiousness that her betrayed Quentin's sense of family honour and the Compson name.

I wouldn't lay my hand on her. The bitch that cost me a job, the one chance I ever had to get ahead, that killed my father and is shortening my mother's life every day and made my name a laughing stock in the town. I wont do anything to her. April Sixth, 1928, 113

Jason in contrast to Quentin is in no psychosis because of damaged notions of family honour- he is embittered that he lost the bank job that was promised to him because of Caddy's divorce from Herbert Head and the subsequent theft of his money by Miss Quentin Caddy's daughter. Jason spends much of his life blaming others for his own failures and playing the victim as well as being mean to others but he is also neurotically obsessed with the loss Caddy has caused him in the form of the job at the bank he was promised by Herbert Head. He is frustrated that Miss Quentin has successfully escaped with his money thus absconding with the money he thought he had cheated Caddy of in revenge for costing him his job at the bank with Herbert Head.

"I've seed de first en de last...I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" April Eighth, 1928, pg. 297

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existences and bring them back to his abode in Paradise- a future she looks forward to in contrast to all the ruin and fragments and bondage to the past that Jason and Quentin experience.

"The broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place" April Eighth, 1928, pg. 321

The narrative ends with the return to Benjy and his innocence- unlike Jason and Quentin who are corrupted by neurosis and psychosis Benjy because of his idiot status is returned to a clean slate of innocence in which things are all in order in contrast to the chaos and sound and fury signifying nothing we had witnessed earlier.

Works cited:

- [1.]Faulkner, William. *The Sound the Fury*,Norton, New York, 1929.