

Family dysfunction in August Osage County and The Sound and Fury

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In contrast to the chaos we see in August Osage County is Dilsey's sense of temporal order and the grounding that she derives from her religion in The Sound and the Fury. 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 the members of this dysfunctional family experience.

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Basically, during an unusually hot summer in the month of August, in rural Osage County outside Pawhuska, Oklahoma, once-noted alcoholic poet Beverly Weston (Sam Shepard) is looking for a live-in cook and caregiver for his strong-willed and quarrelsome wife Violet (Oscar and Golden Globe nominated Meryl Streep) who is suffering from mouth cancer, going through chemotherapy and addicted to narcotics. Shortly after young native American woman Johnna Monevata (Misty Upham) is chosen by him, Beverly disappears, and after five

days he is found drowned, he took his boat out onto the lake and committed suicide, Violet identifies the body and has to make funeral arrangements, a few days earlier she did call on her sister and daughters for support, and this means the entire family will be united for the sad occasion. Violet's sister Mattie Fae Aiken (Orphan's Margo Martindale) comes with husband Charlie Aiken (Chris Cooper), Violet's youngest daughter Ivy (Julianne Nicholson) is single and the only family living close, Violet's oldest daughter Barbara (Oscar, BAFTA and Golden Globe nominated Julia Roberts) who has inherited her mean side comes from Colorado with husband Bill Fordham (Ewan McGregor), they are separated due to having marriage difficulties, and their fourteen year old daughter Jean (Abigail Breslin), and Violet's middle daughter Karen (Juliette Lewis) is bringing the latest of a string of boyfriends, sleazy Florida businessman Steve Huberbrecht (Dermot Mulroney) who is apparently her fiancé. The family member who misses the funeral due to oversleeping is Little Charles Aiken (Benedict Cumberbatch), father Charles picks him up from the bus stop to join the dinner back at the house, he loves his son while mother Mattie thinks of him as a loser, also Ivy expresses her love for Little Charles to Barbara, but it is sad that she cannot bear children due to having a hysterectomy. The family all sit together for an awkward dinner to

share in the memory of Beverly, but Violet in her inebriated state turns it into a terrible "truth telling", with Barbara getting agitated and exposing the drug addiction her mother has, and trying to wrestle her pills from her, but Violet sobers up, and after all the pills have been washed away does have a tender moment with her daughters, revealing she probably gained her cruel streak from her own mother. Jean is almost being seduced by Steve who is giving her his stash of marijuana, Johnna catches them and assumes something more going on, chasing him with a shovel, Barbara gets angry and smacks her daughter, this prompts Bill to take Jean with him back to Colorado, Barbara is left behind because she feels there is still somewhere to go towards making up with her mother, but a divorce will most likely happen now, and Karen realises Steve is not the right man for her. Little Charles and Ivy are close with each other again, and Mattie walks in and cusses him again, father Charles has had enough of her constant putting down of their son and angrily says he will leave with or without her, in a private conversation with Barbara she reveals a big truth, Mattie had an affair with Mattie, so Little Charles is in fact his son and Ivy's brother, so Barbara knows she has to somehow stop them marrying each other. Violet is still using pills that Barbara was unable to find, and at the table Ivy tries to tell her mother about the love she has for Little Charles, Barbara tries to stop her, but Violet interrupts them both assuming she is telling the truth about him being Beverly's son and blurts this truth, she has known for years, Ivy highly upset drives away and angrily telling she will never return. In a last angry discussion between Violet and Barbara the mother

admits that Beverly contacted him before he died, but she did nothing to help him and removed the money from their joint account, and she was too late after doing this, and this is the final straw for Barbara who drives away in a pickup truck, she does stop to have a think, while Violet is left alone with only Johnna for comfort. August Osage County should be viewed less as a religious satire than as a reading of the human condition that deems it utterly meaningless without the founding foundation of Christ and the presence of God. While the attempt to seek meaning seems to be in vain, this could be less a commentary on God's palpable absence than a comment on the utter meaninglessness and void of those who do not wait on God. The message of the film thus seems to be that God will show divine mercy only to those who please him and damn the rest to hell. Hence life is absurd, certainly, but only for the antiheroic who refuse to embrace God's statutes. The life of meaninglessness and absurdity and vanity in waiting is thus for those who do not embrace the life of faith and learn to lean on God's promises. The characters are crazy and dysfunctional because they do not know Christ or seek Him. Christ promises to redeem those who seek him. Violet is sadistic and mean because like Satan she is an accuser rather than a peace maker. She is bitter and does not forgive like Christ. Like Folly in Proverbs 9, Violet mocks others instead of instructing. The Foolish mocker insults, hates, abuses others while wise people will love and correct others. We have to discern Folly from Wisdom and avoid foolish mockers like Violet. Violet is the incarnation of Folly from Proverbs 9. The film is about the violence and hysteria of the unsaved. Life is a tale of

sound and fury meaning nothing for those who do not seek God or are redeemed by him like the film's dysfunctional characters. Indeed, what God gives us is essentially a promise- a promise of hope if we learn to lean on him and seek him, and a life of meaninglessness, vanity and empty striving if we lead the faithless life. So indeed, the film might be indeed seem to be about the vanity about waiting for God, but one should rather see it as the vanity of waiting for God without faith, because God promises a life of meaning and coherence to those who put their faith in him. In contrast to the chaos we see in August Osage County is Dilsey's sense of temporal order and the grounding that she derives from her religion in *The Sound and the Fury*. 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 the members of this dysfunctional family experience.

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

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

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"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.

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