

## THE SOUND AND THE FURY: TIME FRAGMENTATION

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**Abstract:** This study is about individual and time in *The Sound and the Fury*. To what extend time rules an individual? When an individual is unable to overcome the power and dominance of time what destination awaits him? To answer this question, the present study explores the significance of time in *The Sound and the Fury* and how it affects the mentality of each character. To this end the real present which is created by the subconscious memories of the defeated characters, is set against the ideal present, the conscious promising present moment. Characters who are dominated by the power of the frustrating past events are unable to catch up with the social and personal transitions, thus the future fails for them. The obscure structure of the novel resulting from its unconventional time sequence is a projection of the characters' involvement with time. In addition time can be considered as an element of modernism in modern work of art creating a sort of ambiguity which matches the complexity of modern era.

**Keywords:** *modernism, real present vs ideal present, time confusion*

### The Sound and the Fury: Time Fragmentation

*The Sound and the Fury* a noble prize winner novel by William Faulkner is distinguished for the way it deals with the question of time. The novel is a derivative modern work due to its unconventional manipulation of time both stylistically and thematically.

Since most of the characters' subconscious is set to the past, past is constantly in the present so that the sudden shifts from the past to the present and the opposite make the novel stylistically so complex that the reader has to navigate his position in the novel's chronology or the tale becomes meaningless for anyone who does not read it cautiously. Time is also an important theme of the novel affecting the fate of those characters who cannot overcome the power of it. In this respect, some of the important characters of the novel can be called the agents of time to serve the thematic importance of time. The agents of time are Benjy, Quentin, Jason and Dilsey who are the central character-narrator of each section of the novel.

Benjy and Quentin, the two sons of Compson family, screw up with the readers' assumption of time. Through stream of consciousness narration technique of the first two sections narrated accordingly by Benjy and Quentin, Faulkner's complex style, confuses the past and the present in the novel. Benjy is an idiot without the power of articulation or any awareness of time. Benjy cannot formulate the present without recapturing memories of the past.

Though Benjy's section is in the novel's present, the past is just like the present for Benjy. Benjy's mind is unable to focus on a single piece of time, he skips arbitrarily from event to event. Quentin, functions better than Benjy in the present but still he is unable to keep past events memories from dominating his present life. Quentin is captured by the recollections of the past memories. He is incapable of living in the present. His attempt to break his watch is a symbol of his conscious hatred of time but the watch continues to tick to signify that he is unable to stop the flow of time and to escape the past. Benjy and Quentin's sections reveal the past as a backdrop against which the events of the present take place.

For Jason and Dilsey the meaning of time is different. For Jason time is important. He is a man of present as long as his personal interests are concerned. He does not care about the past at all. He makes fun of his famous ancestors and he sells the family home as soon as his mother dies. He is in contrast with Quentin because he does not care about his family's reputation and history. Dilsey is the only character that acknowledges the boundaries between past and present. She is both aware of the past and the present. She witnessed the prosperous past of the Compson family before its downfall. She can be compared to the other agents of time in the novel to serve the theme of time. The thematic and stylistic complexity of Jason and Dilsey's sections, reduce as the chaotic perception of time is reduced and resolved. Whence Benjy's

section is more complex than Quentin's, and Jason's section is less difficult than Benjy's and Quentin's. Dilsey's section is a linear section and the easiest one to be read.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Time fragmentation is an examination of the degree of character tolerance. The unconscious revival of the past by Benjy and the conscious but unavoidable remembrance of the past events by Quentin bring about their eventual downfall. In *The Sound and the Fury* time fragmentation technique brings the past to the present and forsakes the future. The future falls for the family especially for Benjy and Quentin. According to Jean Paul Sartre (1955), "As to Faulkner's heroes, they never look ahead. They face backwards as the car carries them along" (para. 9). Elsewhere he asserts, "Beyond this present time there is nothing, since the future does not exist" (para. 4). The third chain of time is lost in the novel. The regular chain of time which starts from the past, to the present and the future is confused. The present is defined by the past leaving a big gap for the future.

Characters trapped in the past, lack the free will to choose. Benjy a man with extreme mental disability who is unable to speak is a purposeful choice by Faulkner to point to the lack of communication within the characters. Quentin is also difficult to understand and it is difficult for the reader to communicate with his narration without referring to the other sections of the novel.

The constant interjection of the memories into the present line of time and the recurring flashbacks with no sign in the text that the time has shifted, makes the novel extremely confusing for the reader. Olga Kuminova (2010) believes that: “Faulkner’s novel is a very intense, even desperate attempt at communication, reaching out (if without much hope) toward some ideal interlocutor who would comprehend the whole, mental and emotional reality from which the text emerges” (P.44). Lack of communication a common theme of the literature of modern era, reflecting the isolation and loss of the population of aristocrat modern generation, is mirrored by a tangled style. At the same token, the characters’ inability to stand with their society is depicted through time complication in the novel.

Joe Dispenza’s (2017) ideas in his book *Becoming Supernatural*, is very useful for this study. According to Dispenza’s notion of “generous present moment” when people continue thinking about certain things connected to the past, they feel outraged, displeased, repelled and discouraged. He confirms how people “feel and think” forges their consciousness, thus they inhabit in the “familiar past” are stuck in “predictable future”, instead of being in “the generous present moment” moments created from consciousness. As soon as a person becomes conscious of what is happening in his mind, the mind energy spent thinking about the previous bad experiences, is back to that person and that energy is

used for recovery and exhilarating the present moment and this moment is called “generous’ because it builds up future prosperity (pp. 59-62). But in *The Sound and the Fury*, the characters are deprived of the pleasure of ideal present so that no promising future shines to their lives.

### **Hypothesis:**

In the novel the realistic present is so far away from the ideal present. The realistic present is mixed with the past while the idealistic present is pure present. Characters are overcome by the power of time because of the inability to cope with life in a dominant stance. The characters are not capable of living in the moment without the influence and dominance of the past events of life. As most of the tragic heroes of tragedies they suffer a tragic flow in their subconscious. As a result the end of the story of their lives is a tragic ending. Had time been overcome by human mental power the destiny of the characters would be reversed. In *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner manipulates time to show its impact on characters’ destiny.

### **About the Plot:**

The Compsons are an old aristocratic Southern family from Jefferson, Mississippi in fictional Yoknapatawpha County. After the Civil War the Compsons declined in wealth, morality and sanity. Jason III is the father an ineffective alcoholic and Caroline his wife is a self-obsessed, and their children have a host of problems. Their four children are Benjy, Quentin, Jason IV and Caddy.

The central tension of the story involves the three brother's individual obsessions with Caddy. The novel has four sections. The first narrator is Benjy, a mute, mentally disabled man. Quentin, a young Harvard student, speaks in June, 1910, and Jason, speaks in April 1928. The last chapter of the novel is Faulkner's own voice, focusing on Dilsey, the family's devoted back servant who plays a great part in raising the children. There is an absent character in the novel, Candace nicknamed Caddy, the only daughter of the family, and the center of the novel. Although her presence is pervasive throughout the novel, Caddy does not actually appear in the novel. She is reconstructed through the memories of her three brothers, each of whom remembers and relates to her in different ways.

Mrs. Compson, a selfish complaining woman, lies in bed all day while the black housekeeper, Dilsey, cooks and cleans. Benjy is looked after by Luster, Dilsey's teenaged grandson. The household has one other member, Quentin, the seventeen year old daughter Caddy. Caddy's husband left her when he realized that the infant she has given birth to could not possibly be his. So Caddy sent the baby home for her mother and Dilsey to raise. Quentin is named for the Compson family's older son, who killed himself eighteen years earlier while he was a student at Harvard.

In the novel the reader experiences time as a series of muddled perceptions. The novel is in four parts. Parts one, three and four all occur during the Easter weekend of

1928 at the Compson household. Part two takes place in 1910, following Quentin's experiences at Harvard.

In the first section Benjy remembers the past. As he hangs around a golf course in his thirty-three birthday, he remembers the death of his grandmother, Quentin and Caddy playing in a stream, his own attack on a passing school girl, Caddy first kissing a boy and first wearing a perfume and her wedding. After Caroline dies, Jason sends Benjy to an asylum and sells the Compson house.

Quentin's section like Benjy's oscillates between past and present. It takes place at Harvard eighteen years before, on the day he commits suicide. He is hunted by the constant ticking of his grandfather's watch, the loss of the Compson honor by Caddy's loss of virginity. He is tormented by memories of Caddy's promiscuity. He remembers his encounters with Caddy's first lover and her husband, and his father saying virginity is a meaningless concept. In the present, he breaks his watch which still keeps ticking. He buys bread for a young Italian girl and gets beat by her brother. The actions of the present In 1990, are his preparing to commit suicide. Eventually he goes to the nearby Charles River Bridge, and commits suicide.

Jason IV's narrative is about the day before Benjy's narration. The bitter cruel Jason works at farm supply store and steals money that Caddy sends to her daughter Miss Quentin.

Jason also dwells on the past and Caddy, as Caddy's husband had offered Jason a bank job, but then retracted it when they divorced because of Caddy's illegitimate child Quentin. Miss Quentin, at last, learns about her uncle's subterfuge and steals thousands of dollars from him. She runs away with a man from a traveling show. Jason pursues her without luck.

The fourth section of the novel takes place two days after Jason's section. This section is sometimes referred to as "Dilsey's Section" because of her prominence in this section. The Dilsey Section focuses on Dilsey's attendance at an Easter church service, at which a preacher from St. Louis, Reverend Shegog, delivers a sermon that stirs in Dilsey an epiphany of doom for the Compson family.

### **Realistic Present vs Idealistic Present:**

Realistic present is the daily unconscious disposition of the present. Our minds let the events of different tenses draft freely without any conscious self-control. This way the constant presence of the past memory in the present moment is unavoidable thus our present thoughts are afflicted by the past experiences. As Joe Dispenza (2017) points out: "For the most part your brain is a product of the past. It had been shaped and modeled to become a living record of everything you have learned and experienced up to this point of your life" (P. 56). As it comes out from Dispenza's assertion, our brain is inclined towards remembering the past. Consequently, if

not controlled, our minds become the embodiment of what has happened to us before. It is a phantasm of the present which is experienced by most of people in general and characters of *The Sound and the Fury* in particular.

In *The Sound and the Fury* time's impact on major characters is more profound than the time's impact in real life. In a modern novel the characterization is as unorthodox the style. As modern characters, Benjy and Quentin, are dramatically obsessed with their memories since they are unable to be in the present moment. Their problems stem from their eccentric personalities, the unconscious sexual desires for a sibling, to say Caddy. They keep thinking about memories about the loss of Caddy and according to Joe Dispenza (2017), when you think about a past event over and over, "you are hardwiring your brain into the same patterns. As a result your brain becomes an artifact of your past thinking, and in time it becomes easier to automatically think in the same ways" (p. 71). Over-remembering of memories is an important exaggerated quality of Faulkner's characters to emphasize the significant importance of time in human life. The trace of time can be found everywhere in the novel, even in the very beginning of the novel, the title.

The title of the novel is an affirmation of time significance. It is an allusion to William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*. In Act V, as Macbeth is about to be defeated and killed, hears that his wife is dead. He responds with his famous tomorrow soliloquy.

The soliloquy begins by the time expression, tomorrow. Ironically there is no tomorrow neither for Macbeth nor for the Compson family. For Macbeth, Life is a tale told by an idiot, as the first part of the novel is told through the mind of the idiot Benjy and life is a brief candle as it is for Quentin. As in the Shakespeare's tragedy, the same fate is awaiting the Compson family in the sense that there is no future success for the tragic heroes of both tales. Elaborating on allusion and theme in *The Sound and the Fury* and Faulkner's other novel *Absalom, Absalom*, Stephanie M. Kellogg (2004), approves that "Characters who try to escape time, such as Quentin Compson and Thomas Sutpen, remain truly tragic, while those who accept time endure" (p. 2). The novel can also be called a tragedy so far as the characters fail because of their tragic flaws. Their eccentricity comes from their extreme traits to an exaggerated degree, so that they lose the chance of creating the ideal moment, a moment of freedom from the obsessions and disturbed mentalities.

The novel is opened by Benjamin Compson's narration of the first section. He begins the novel at the end of the story of Compsons and the end of his narration is the beginning of the Compsons' story. In the opening scene, the novel's present time, April 1928, Benjy is looking at the pasture, which was sold to a golf club. While he was watching the golfers, one of them call "Caddie", the name of his beloved sister. He starts remembering memories of his sister, Caddy. In 1898, during their

grandma's funeral, the four Compson children were forced to play outside. Caddy climbed a tree in the yard to watch inside of the house and her three brothers noticed that her underpants were muddy. Her muddy underpants which symbolized her later promiscuity, also symbolized her brothers' obsession with her virginity and their incestuous sexual urge for her. Benjy's other memory was the change of his name to Benjamin after the family discovered something was wrong with him in 1900. The marriage and divorce of her sister and her disappearance which was a loss to Benjy, caused him mourn for seventeen years later. He also remembered his castration shortly after Caddy's wedding, when he chased after a girl in the street, fearing his parents that he has developed sexual urges.

The overpowering feeling of Benjy's section is loss. Benjy is utterly depended upon Caddy. Caddy is what he loves the best, and he loses her. Caddy is the only person who understands him perfectly. She is consistently gentle, loving, and teaching for him. Caddy is physically close to Benjy and she has the odor Benjy loves. Caddy's memories are soothing for Benjy. The truth is that Benjy resorts to the memories of the happy times with his beloved Caddy as a regenerating power because he cannot get along with the present moment without the supporting past. Had he had the capacity to take his thoughts and feelings from the past life, and had he put his mind energy on building the moment, he would have constructed a future different from his fate in the novel.

The bitter reality is that Benjy is a victim of his mental disability, his articulation problem and an uncommunicative society surrounding him.

The second section of the novel is told in Quentin's mind, on the day he commits suicide. He remembers the tension in the family while he is at Harvard. His emotions chained to the past frustrations create his present state of being. Unlike Benjy who looks at the past objectively, without judgment or any consideration of cause and effect, Quentin analyses the past events deeply. Unlike Benjy for whom the past memories are a tranquilizing, Quentin penetrates into the depth of actions and suffers the causes and motivations behind them just to ruin the present moment. Benjy's past life is a paradise lost which he laments the loss of it. Quentin's past is a bitter fact torturing him constantly. For both of them the core of the past is defined by Caddy, a source of love for Benjy and an incestuous sense of love for Quentin. The reason behind Quentin's obsession with time is his obsession with Caddy's virginity.

The second section is opened when Quentin remembers his father's remarks about time. Mr. Compson views time as a cure for all life injuries. Quentin cannot get along with this simplistic notion of time. He was horrified when he discovered Caddy's pregnancy and loss of virginity and this terrible feeling stayed with him till the last moments of his life. Time couldn't wipe the painful trace of previous actions out of Quentin's mind. Instead, he tried to stop time

desperately by his symbolic reactions to clocks and watches, for example to tear the hands of his watch. Ultimately, he resorts to suicide as the only means of stopping time and escaping from the torturing life.

The third section is narrated by Jason, the third child of the family who seems more practical than either of his brothers. The events of this section take place a day before Benjy's section, on Good Friday. His one dimensional mentality is oriented towards the desire for material wealth and getting ahead. He lacks the emotionality and sensitivity of his brothers' characters. In this sense he is more inclined to live in the ideal present moment and he is the only brother who has a future. Michael Millgate (1965) compares the characterization of the three sections of the novel in this way: "The progression from Benjy's section through Quentin's to Jason's is accompanied by an increasingly sense of social reality: Benjy is remote in his idiocy and innocence, Quentin moves from the isolation of his half-mad idealism into the total withdrawal of suicide, but Jason is wholly in the world, acutely sensitive to social values, swimming with the contemporary commercial current." (para. 16) Jason seems to be more becoming than his other two brothers.

Jason's section is narrated in a linear straightforward fashion and is much easier to read. In this section there is no interruption of the abrupt intrusion of the pieces of the past Y events as it consistently happens in the first two sections.

Analyzing the communication of different sections of the novel narrated by different characters, Olga Kuminova (2010) elaborates Jason's section in this way: "The narrative style of Jason's section is closer to first person narration rather than stream of consciousness, it is regularly punctuated and capitalized, there are no loose pronouns without reference, no enigmatic metaphors as in Benjy's section, and in general the narration is more coherent" (p. 50). The style of the chapter suits Jason's realistic character, yet he is not a character we feel sympathetic for. He is a petty businessman with a filthy language, blames other people for his troubles and says nasty things about others. He is the only one of the Compson children not haunted by the spirit of the past. He is able to function in the modern world with any degree of success. To sum it up he is the closest character to idealistic perception of the present.

Section four centers around Dilsey, and it is omniscient narrative. It happens on Easter Sunday, April 8, 1928. Dilsey, the black housekeeper of the Compsons is described by Evelyn Scott (1929) as "the old colored woman, who provides the beauty of coherence against the background of struggling choice" (p.9). She takes good care of the Compson children, and her generous heart goes out to the two most vulnerable members of the family, Benjy and Caddy's daughter, Quentin. She is a good mother to her three children and encourages them to work hard and behave properly. At the same time, she teaches them how to

survive in a world run by whites. Indeed, the Compson's black servant survived the family destruction. The way she reacts to the kitchen clock which is not adjusted correctly, points to her balanced mentality. As long as she is certain about the boundaries between the past and the present, each time she checks the clock she corrects the time in her mind.

### **Conclusion:**

When the conscious part of the mind is overwhelming, man takes control of his own thoughts. Dilsey is conscious of her thoughts and does not let her values and spirit be affected by what occurs around her. Regarding the Compsons' case, it is the subconscious which rules the mind, a subconscious programed by the past experiences. Almost all of the family members suffer from what is registered in their subconscious part of their minds whence they behave automatically following the same pattern of thinking and actions every day. They are not aware of their total responsibility in life to govern their minds and enjoy the ideal moment. In Dilsey's case, there is a balance between conscious and subconscious mind so that she makes the best logical and emotional choices when she reacts to the outside world. After all those tragic events of the previous sections, Dilsey's section is a comic relief. Easy time sequence of the section along with her hope and motivation in dealing with the family affairs gets the reader away from the absurdity and emptiness of failed destinies to a brighter word of hope and possibility.

The central reason for her successful life, despite of the hardship of her life as a black servant, is that she consciously chooses to be responsible for making a fresh new present moment not affected by the past events. She is the agent for ideal present in the novel set against the real present experienced by the other characters of the novel including interest seeker and materialist character Jason.

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