

**The Social Corruption in William  
Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury***

**A paper by**

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**I**

Among his contemporary American novelists, William Faulkner (1897-1962) is considered one of the best who has dealt with the topic of the American Civil War (1861-1865) and its horrible economic and social consequences on the American South. Being a descendant of the American South, Faulkner has been able to notice the great gap the war made between the greatness of the agrarian pre-war American South and the corruption of the same society hereafter.

Some of his novels show the corruption of the Southern aristocracy after the destruction of its wealth and way of life during the civil war. Faulkner populates his novels about the South with old mansions the inhabitants of which are noble families that fail to live up

to their past greatness. Beneath the shadow of the old grandeur, these families attempt to cling to the old southern values and codes that are corrupted and out of place in the reality of the modern world. The families in Faulkner's novels are rife with irresponsible parents, failed sons and disgraced daughters <sup>(1)</sup>.

One of Faulkner's most successful and innovative novels is *The Sound and the Fury* which was first published in 1929. Beside its difficult technique, the stream of consciousness style, the novel is a precise study of the social corruption of the American South represented by the downfall of an old southern family, the Compsons, whose members are victims of lust, suicide and greed. The novel is divided into four parts: the first three are narrated by the three brothers Benjy, Quentin and Jason respectively whereas the last one is handled by the novelist as a third person narrator <sup>(2)</sup>. Besides, the novel covers three generations of the Compsons but in 1946 an appendix

to the novel was added by Faulkner showing the destiny of a fourth generation of the Compson's family and attempting to indicate that the social corruption and moral degeneration which started in and after the war would last for a long time.

And then is heard  
no more; it is a  
tale

Told by an idiot,  
full of sound and  
fury,

Signifying nothing.

(V, v, 24-28)

## II

It is observable that William Faulkner has given two hints about the theme of *The Sound and the Fury*. One is its title that is taken from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which there is a reference to the corruption of life. In Act V, as Macbeth is about to be killed he hears that his wife is dead so he responds:

Life's but a  
walking shadow, a  
poor player,  
That struts and  
frets his hour  
upon the stage,

In the same way, *The Sound and the Fury* is a tale told (in its first part) by the idiot, Benjy Compson. In addition, throughout the novel, Faulkner emphasizes the idea that life is nothing but a shadow. The word "shadow" constantly appears in Quentin's part and is frequently found in the rest of the novel. Moreover, the implication that life is a shadow is also used by Faulkner to indicate that the actions performed by the modern man are corrupted and are only shadows of the great actions performed by the men of the past. In other words, the modern man himself is only a shadow of a being, imperfectly formed and inadequate to cope with the

problems of the modern life. In fact, Faulkner does not have much good to say about the modern world. The fate of the Compsons indicates the impossibility of living in a materialistic world with its corrupt values. This is why all the Compson children, except Jason, long for the past <sup>(3)</sup>.

The second hint about the theme of the novel is Faulkner's frequent claim that the novel is a story of a little girl with muddy drawers who is watching her grandmother's funeral from a tree while her brothers wait below. This early image of "the muddy bottom of her [Caddy's] drawers" <sup>(4)</sup> symbolizes her later promiscuity. Moreover, as the two of her brothers see it, Caddy's sexual looseness would corrupt the Compson family structure <sup>(5)</sup>.

The social corruption is shown all through the various generations of the Compsons. Mr. Compson, the father, is a shadowy character. He is weak and inefficient to face reality. He surrenders to the bitter fate of his family because he does not play his

role as a real father. He is used to sitting alone in his room, restoring to alcohol, reading classics and sometimes trying to pass to his sons some values which he himself lacks <sup>(6)</sup>. Although he is well-spoken, he is a very cynical and detached man. He subscribes to a philosophy of fatalism and cynicism; he says, "... all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away" (p. 159). He believes that life is essentially meaningless and that he can do little to change the events that befall his family. Despite his cynicism, Mr. Compson maintains notions of gentlemanliness and family honour which Quentin inherits. But though he inculcates his sons with the concept of family name, Mr. Compson is unconcerned with it in practice. He seems indifferent to Caddy's illegal pregnancy telling Quentin to accept it as a natural womanly shortcoming. He says, "Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature" (p.

107), and that Caddy is not “quite worth despair” (p. 161). Such an attitude greatly upsets Quentin who is ashamed of his father’s disregard for traditional southern ideals of honour and rapidly initiates Quentin’s fall towards depression and suicide <sup>(7)</sup>.

On the other hand, Mrs. Compson's negligence and disregard directly contribute to the family downfall. Her egocentricity withdraws her from her children’s affairs specially at time of urgency. Lost in a haze of hypochondria, she constantly retires to bed claiming that she is terribly ill. Her illness is a pretext to escape or reject her responsibilities. This indicates her diseased personality and inability to contact with reality. She is unable to bestow love, sympathy and warmth for her posterity; she is absent as a mother to her children. Her marriage is initially a failure for it is not based on mutual understanding and love so her duty to bring up dependable and honest offspring is neglected. She even treats the

mentally disabled Benjy cruelly and selfishly. Benjy, for her, is a “punishment for putting aside [her] pride” (p. 96). She changes the name of her idiot son from Maury, her brother's name, to Benjy in order not to be associated with her family’s prestige. This is part of her neurotic insecurity over her Bascomb family name and honour which are ironically stained by her brother Maury’s adulterous behaviour. She is completely detached from her sons to the extent that she believes that Quentin has killed himself just to hurt her; she says, “I don’t know. What reason did Quentin have? ... It can’t be simply to flout and hurt me... I’m a lady. You might not believe that from my offspring but I’m” (p. 266). But Mrs. Compson foolishly lavishes all her favour and attention upon Jason who does not reciprocate her love. On his part, Jason slyly keeps reminding her of the disgrace brought by her other children to the family’s name. For her, Jason is her only son who is

“more Bascomb than Compson” (p. 96) <sup>(8)</sup>.

The offspring of such parents is expectedly corrupt. The first aspect of the family's decay is noticed in Benjy's character. Fearing that he develops sexual urges, his parents have him castrated. Thus, his retardation and impotence reflect the corrupt and futile world he lives in. Benjy is often unconsciously absorbed in his own memories of childhood; most of which revolve around Caddy and her innocence. Although he is unable to distinguish the past from the present, such sweet memories he is absorbed in increase his violent reactions against the present corruption which he can only sense. This is to indicate that the corruption and the chaos of the world around can even be felt and reflected upon by an idiot. In this respect, Benjy has an acute sensitivity to any disorder taking place within his family <sup>(9)</sup>. He can sense Caddy's promiscuity and loss of virginity. For Benjy, she does not “smell trees anymore, and I [Benjy]

began to cry” (p. 43). Moreover, he can even sense Quentin's suicide thousands of miles away at Harvard. Ironically, Benjy is the only character who can sense the Compson family's progressive decline. Lawrence Thompson describes Benjy as a mirror “in which the various members of the family can see their own actions reflected and implicitly evaluated” <sup>(10)</sup>. This is why the mirror takes a large space in Benjy's memories; he keeps on watching the various members of his family move in and out of the mirror:

Caddy and Jason  
were fighting in  
the mirror... We  
could see Caddy  
fighting in the  
mirror and  
father put me  
down and went  
into the mirror  
and fought too...  
He rolled into the

corner, out of the mirror. Father brought Caddy to the fire. They were all out of the mirror (pp. 64 - 65).

The mirror is, therefore, a surface that reflects the corrupt world to which Benjy himself simultaneously responds. Benjy's disability, however, renders him able to formulate no reflection to any corruption but moaning, bellowing and howling.

Caddy is another member of the corrupt family which is devoid of love and compassion. Because the family lacks the passion of a mother, Caddy becomes a warm lap for her brothers, Benjy and Quentin. She takes care of Benjy and explains his needs to others. She replaces the love that is denied him by his own mother. Benjy describes her the way a child might talk about his mother; he lets the reader know all the things she does to make him comfortable and happy. "Caddy smelled like

trees" (p. 25), he often thinks. As Caddy grows up with a hypochondriac mother and a weak father, she feels that she has to reject such a lifeless world of the Compson's family. She even admits that she does not love the men she has slept with; her relationships are therefore regarded as deliberate forms of rejection of the Compson world. Her rejection reaches the peak when she is willing to commit suicide or incest offered by her brother Quentin because she believes that either of the two taboo deeds would be a strong act of rejection that copes with the corrupt world around.

Caddy's oldest brother, Quentin, is also victimized by his cold and cynical parents. As his mother yields no love and his father rejects everything in life, Quentin turns to Caddy for love and understanding. He reflects his feeling towards his mother saying, "If I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother" (p. 156). As for his father, Quentin wishes to reject his

cynical philosophy but the corrupt modern world constantly seems to confirm Mr. Compson's view of life. For instance, Mr. Compson has once told him that all women are to be mistrusted. Quentin cannot find ethical values that refute his father's negative opinion; therefore, his obsession with Caddy's virginity is an indicator of his desire to find something pure and unspoiled in the corrupt world. He lives in the aura of the past innocence and cannot escape such heritage <sup>(11)</sup>. His father has told him that time heals all wounds and makes a person forget all grief but Quentin does not want to forget. He believes that his whole existence would be meaningless if he forgets. Hence, he kills himself to miss any opportunity to forget Caddy's dishonour. In other words, his suicide is an attempt to transcend or break free from time in order to relieve his intensive pain over Caddy <sup>(12)</sup>. Even the horrible declaration he makes to his father that he has an incestuous relationship with his sister springs from a sick

imagination. For him, suffering an eternal punishment in hell does not matter since he is united with Caddy; he says, "If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me..." (p. 108).

The third brother Jason is an embodiment of the corrupt values of the American South because he has forsaken all the morals and social ties. He is the only Compson who is not bothered being found in the new corrupt society which weighs everything by materialistic standards, as he himself is an outcome of that society. Faulkner tries to refer to the supremacy of the materialistic beliefs in the American post-war society when he states, "There are too many Jasons in the South who can be successful as there are too many Quentins in the South who are too sensitive to face its reality" <sup>(13)</sup>. Whereas Quentin is obsessed with the past, Jason thinks solely of the present and the immediate future. His utilitarian spirit is revealed when he says that

“[money] does not belong to anybody... It just belongs to the man that can get it and keep it” (p. 175), so for Jason “only the dollar counts” <sup>(14)</sup>.

From his early childhood, Jason reveals malice and hatred towards the others. But ironically, the loveless Jason is the only one of the Compson children who receives Mrs. Compson's affection. Whereas the other children need and want Mrs. Compson's love, Jason neither wants it nor requites it. In fact, he manipulates his mother's love to steal money from Miss Quentin when he forges the checks of Caddy. He is self-centered and constantly tries to twist circumstances in his favour; always at the expense of the others. He hates all women so fervently that he cannot marry and have children. Jason's only satisfaction as an adult comes from a sexual relation with a prostitute. Whereas he respects his cheap whore he keeps in Memphis, he delights in beating his niece for going out with men. He cannot forget his spiteful feelings towards the

others; he never forgives Caddy for the loss of the job at Herbert's bank. This probably increases his grudge towards her daughter, Quentin <sup>(15)</sup>. He makes fun of his ancestors and sells the family house as soon as his mother dies. Ironically, Jason becomes the head of the Compson household after his father's death which is an indicator of the low level the once-great family has reached.

The social corruption is also shown by a third generation represented by Miss Quentin who is named so in the memory of her uncle. In fact, Quentin and her mother symbolize the morally corrupted society they are members of. Faulkner states that *The Sound and the Fury* is a “tragedy of two lost women: Caddy and her daughter” <sup>(16)</sup>. But Quentin represents a further step in the deterioration of that society. This is why Lois Gordon sees that she “has inherited her mother's vices but none of her virtues” <sup>(17)</sup>. Although Miss Quentin repeats Caddy's early promiscuity and misconduct, she, unlike her mother,



does not feel guilty about her actions. She says, "I'm bad and I'm going to hell, and I don't care" (p. 171). Miss Quentin grows up in a meaner world than Caddy does so it is not surprising that she is not loving or compassionate as her mother. She shows contempt and disgust for all the family including the mentally disabled, Benjy. Her worldliness and lack of compunction which are typical modern values are eventually revealed when she runs off with a man taking all Jason's money-both his savings and the money Caddy has sent for her <sup>(18)</sup>. The portrayal of Miss Quentin's character refers to the progressive social corruption and indicates that the newer generation of the Compson as a representative of the American South has the least human values which the modern world has rendered obsolete.

### III

Since *The Sound and the Fury* is a study of the decline of the modern American society, the stream of consciousness used by Faulkner supports its subject matter.

The plot is unfolded through the free association of ideas in the minds of the characters. Just as the turbulent current of the modern life carries the characters rather haphazardly, so do thoughts and images travel through their minds in an apparently unorganized and illogical succession. Faulkner gets into the minds of his characters to show the psychological motivations for their actions. This is noticeable in the first three sections to indicate the reflections of their narrators towards the world around.

Because the mind of the idiot does not function logically, Faulkner basically records Benjy's actions in terms of images. Besides, the scenes frequently jump from 1928 to 1910 to indicate that one cannot escape the past for it is a shelter to reside in away from the corrupt present. On the other hand, Quent\_\_\_\_\_ section is more complicated because his mind is much more advanced than Benjy's. But his actions are mainly motivated by two thoughts: the dishonour of his sister and the pessimistic philosophy of his father. His breaking of the watch shows Quentin's longing to the past and his

wish to stop the time. With Jason's section, the style noticeably changes and the events flow at a rapid pace. Jason is concerned only with getting money and punishing others so he is not troubled with the intricacies of life. The irony is that the order and the logicity of Jason's section are the results of his single-minded viciousness. This is a hint by the novelist that the superficiality and the selfishness are the typical features of the corrupt society.

Hence, the Faulknerian characters of this novel are portrayed in a way that shows the ongoing corruption of the American South and the modern world as a whole.

#### Notes

1. [www.sparknotes.com/lit/sound\\_fury](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/sound_fury). Access on 9.8.2006.
2. Frank N. Magill ed., *Masterpieces of World Literature* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1955), P. 917.
3. [www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/sndfury.asp](http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/sndfury.asp). Access on 9.8.2006.
4. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), P. 41. All the subsequent references to the novel will be taken from this edition and their pages will parenthetically be written.
5. Michael Millgate, *William Faulkner* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1970), p. 97.
6. Edmond L. Volpe, *A reader's Guide to William Faulkner* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), P. 105.
7. [www.sparknotes.com/lit/sound\\_fury](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/sound_fury). Access on 9.8.2006.
8. [www.usask.ca/english/faulkner/main/criticism/sartre.html](http://www.usask.ca/english/faulkner/main/criticism/sartre.html).
9. Fredrick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 247.
10. Lawrence Thompson, *William Faulkner: An Introduction and*

- Interpretation* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1964), p. 36.
11. Louis D. Robin and Robert D. Jacobs, *Modern Southern Literature in its Cultural Setting* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1961), p. 23.
  12. Perrin Lowery, "Concepts of Time in The Sound and the Fury" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations* ed. by Michael Cowan (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 56. 11
  13. Quoted in Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist thought in the South, 1919 - 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 178.
  14. Cleanth Brooks, *Community, Religion and Literature* (Colombia: University of Missouri Press, 1955), p. 117.
  15. [www.sparknotes.com/lit/soundandthefury](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/soundandthefury). Access on 9.8.2006.
  16. Quoted in Malcolm Cowley ed. *Writers at Work* (London: Mercury Book, 1962), p. 117.
  17. Lois Gordon, "Meaning and Myth in The Sound and the Fury and the Waste Land" in Warren French ed., *The Twenties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* (Florida: Evert/Edwards, Inc., 1975), p. 284.
  18. [www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/sndfury.asp](http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/sndfury.asp). Access on 9.8.2006

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