

## **Sound and Fury Echoes Through Time**

“I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire [...]. I give it 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” (Faulkner 47).

Death and decay is one of the main leitmotifs overshadowing William Faulkner’s most acclaimed novel *The Sound and The Fury*. The towering theme of decay is hewn with the author’s fatalistic conception of time, while death is at the center of the Compson children’s lives, Quentin and Caddy. A famous contemporary philosopher of Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre, defined the Southerner’s notion of time perfectly: “A man sitting in an open car and looking backwards. At every moment, formless shadows flickering, faint tremblings and patches of light rise up on either side of him and only afterwards, when he has a little perspective, do they become trees and men and cars”(Sartre 255). I propose that Faulkner’s fatalistic interpretation of time and protagonists’ struggle in the troubled times of drastic change is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was 80 years ago.

Before Faulkner’s version of time is analyzed and the Compson children characterized, a few details of the author’s time period and writing style of *The Sound and The Fury* have to be discussed in order to grasp the full impact of his message. At the end, I will place the results in the context of the twenty-first century revealing the common thread through time. Much has been written about Faulkner’s flagship novel *The Sound and The Fury*- including pieces by luminaries, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Robert Warren Penn. However, with a few exceptions the critical reception abruptly ends after the 1980’s as such my paper represents an original approach to embed this work published in 1929 in the context of our time. Moreover, most of the secondary literature deals with form and style rather than content. Thus, Faulkner’s writing technique will only be mentioned comparatively briefly.

The Sound and The Fury's form is mind-bogglingly unconventional on three levels. Instead of focusing on characters experiencing certain trials and errors the novel centers on poignant events in the life of the four Compson children. The first three chapters are told from the perspective of the three boys written in the stream-of-consciousness style and the final chapter by an omniscient narrator. Even though the whole story revolves around Caddy, she does not even have her own chapter. Thus, the reader gains a deep, interesting insight into each brother, but the writing style and the characters also greatly obscure the content with "illusory obsessive imagery" (Brown 544). Consequently, the narrators constantly move backwards and forwards through time, thus their stories are not told in chronological order.

Kartiganer interprets this quest for form as "a book of total despair" (619) and "alienation of men" (637). Brown supports this interpretation and pinpoints the fact that "the decaying world is [...] at the heart of the novel" (544). This despair and decay is exemplified in the conception of time "because no battle is ever won [...]. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair [...]" (Faulkner 47). Not only does the style center on these gloomy leitmotifs all the important events of the novel focus on death: The funeral of the grandmother, the suicide of Quentin, the social death of Caddy by her promiscuity in a very strict and traditional society. Therefore, the question arises as to why Faulkner is so obsessed with the idea of death and decay. The time period and certain traits of the author offer insight. Furthermore, it is essential to become acquainted with Faulkner's era in order to compare it to the twenty-first century.

"The South, which Faulkner had grown up in [...], was cut off, inward-turning, backward looking. It was a culture frozen in its virtues and vices" (Warren 275). The South, which Faulkner was writing in, found itself in a period of rapid progress, cultural shock and change. However, the archaic values of the "Old South" were irreconcilable with the times of drastic change. Thus, his "quest for form" was a way of coping with these troubled, contradictory times (Warren 277). The theme of death and decay is a way of dealing with the

change in Southern society. In other words, he has to cope with the sorrowful experience of the downfall of Southern Belles and Chivalries. Therefore, decay and death are merely symptoms of the radical changes in all aspects of life in the South during that time.

The Compson children illustrate this fall from grace of old norms and morals. However, to understand the characters in Faulkner's novel, it is necessary to understand his intertwined perception of time and man:

Also, to me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment. All of his and her ancestry, background, is all a part of himself and herself at any moment. And so a man, a character in a story at any moment of action is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him. (Gwynn and Blotner 84)

Essential events in the life of the characters convey who they really are. Hence, the four chapter titles are simply dates.

Quentin is the perfect example of Faulkner's entangled construction of time and man. He is the man sitting in the car and looking back at his life. The moment of his recollection is the very instant of his death (Sartre 258). Quentin says himself: "Non sum. Fui" (Faulkner 106).<sup>1</sup> This statement conveys his resigned attitude towards life. Quentin inherits his fatalistic attitude from his father, who hands over the watch of the grandfather to his son with the words: "I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire [...]. Because no battle is ever won [...]. 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" (Faulkner 47). Furthermore, Quentin is the mirror for old-fashioned norms and values of the "Old South". He is obsessed with the virginity of his sister and her promiscuity haunts him (see Vickery 1026 ff.). Even though, Quentin loves and tries to protect Caddy, he condemns her and does not resist the

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<sup>1</sup> I am not. I was.

abandonment of her by the family. This internal conflict combined with his fatalistic notion leads to his suicide.

Caddy's affair and the birth of her illegitimate child in the morally antiquated South also cause her more trouble than she can bear. She deliberately breaks with the conventions and gender roles of her time: Caddy "demands that brothers and servants obey her [...] fights with Quentin, and dreams of being a general, giant or king [...]" (Wadlington 420). The consequence of this behavior is that she is banished from her family "by decree of Mrs. Compson, Caddy's name is never openly spoken after this disgraceful episode" (Bass 729). However, she realizes that her sexual rebellion is her social death: "When they touched me I died" (Faulkner 90).

The previous analysis has demonstrated that the brilliant intertwining of form and content revolving around death and decay creates an overwhelming sensation of despair. However, I propose that decay is not the heart of the book, but a symptom of its true nature: the unstoppable, fast moving force of progress. Naturally, contemporaries of Faulkner assumed that the fundamental change in nearly all aspects of life has to lead to a clash of ideals, morals and values. Caddy adopts the new values and rebels against the old-fashioned society, while Quentin chooses to resign from his inner conflict through suicide. The construction of time in *The Sound and The Fury* supports this interpretation. Time moves too fast for the characters to comprehend it and only by looking back can they understand the whole.

Rebellion against old norms and morals, fast-moving nature and daily advances in every aspect of life are also features describing the twenty-first century. Even though the time periods are inherently different, the struggles of Caddy and Quentin are similar to the problems of modern people. Caddy fights against archaic gender roles, while Quentin cannot cope with the relentless movement of time. Though Faulkner does not offer a solution for the problems he highlights, but is overwhelmed by a fatalistic, depressing attitude. That is the

reason for the death and decay imagery since change is something fundamentally dreadful in *The Sound and The Fury*.

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