

The Sound and the Fury Discussion Questions

Benjy's Section pp. 3-75

Talking about *The Sound and the Fury* in your book club, on our message boards or with one of your friends? These thought-provoking questions will get the discussion flowing!

1. This section moves between the past and present with little more than a change in typeface to signify time shifts. How did you learn to find your way through Benjy's chapter? What is Faulkner saying about time and memory by having Benjy introduce the Compson family story?
2. Although Benjy is mentally challenged, he is able to recall many conversations and significant moments from his family's past. Discuss some of the events Benjy is remembering. Do you think he is a reliable narrator?
3. Loss and longing permeate Benjy's chapter. Who and what have Benjy lost? Which losses resonate most with him?
4. What objects does Caddy use to soothe Benjy?
5. On the day Damuddy dies, Caddy is the only Compson child willing to climb the tree to look in the room. What does this say about Caddy's personality?
6. When Benjy was 5 years old his name was changed from Maury. For what reason was his name changed? What do you think this says about the Compson family values?
7. Benjy senses Caddy's sexual maturation. How does he try to forestall the changes? What is Caddy's response?
8. Discuss the ways in which the Compsons and the Gibsons care for Benjy. Do you think they function as a typical extended family, or is there something special about Benjy that ties them together?

Quentin's Section pp. 76-179

1. The title of the book is taken from the despairing speech in William Shakespeare's *MacBeth*: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,/ To the last syllable of recorded time/ And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!/ Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more. It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/"

Signifying nothing." At this point in the play, MacBeth has just learned that his wife has killed herself and their plans for seizing the throne will not work out. How are Benjy and Quentin represented in the *MacBeth* quote? Who do you think is "the idiot"?

2. In this section, Quentin repeats some of the same incidents Benjy already described. Why do you think Faulkner chose to tell the story in this manner? What are the similarities and differences in the way Benjy and Quentin relate to their memories?

3. Why does Quentin refuse to look at watches and clocks? How is time an important theme in the novel so far?

4. Quentin overheard his mother saying that he, Caddy and Benjy are a curse, and that Jason is the only child she is proud of. Why does she feel this way? How does this knowledge affect Quentin?

5. What does Quentin's fixation on his father, Jason, indicate about his feelings about masculinity and honor?

6. Why do you think Quentin reacts violently when he hears of others' sexuality?

7. Why does Quentin lie, telling his father that he was the person who impregnated Caddy? Given Quentin's state of mind at the time, what do you think of Mr. Compson's response to him? Is there something incestuous about Quentin's feelings for his sister?

8. What is Quentin's relationship with black characters, especially the man named Deacon at Harvard? What does this have to do with his being a "Southern gentleman"?

9. What does Quentin's incident with the Italian girl signify?

10. Ultimately, why do you feel Quentin commits suicide? Why does Faulkner choose to have Quentin narrate his own section, even though he has been dead for nearly 18 years?

Jason's Section pp. 180-264

1. Is Jason represented in the quote from Shakespeare's *MacBeth*?

2. How does this section differ from Benjy and Quentin's? What does the difference signify about each brother's personality, specifically in terms of isolation and happiness?

3. Benjy, Quentin and Jason each put more emphasis on Caddy's life than can be considered

healthy. How does each do this? What happens because of it?

4. Who does Jason choose as the targets of his anger? What does this say about him? Is Jason really the confident "lord of the house" that he makes himself out to be? Do you think he succeeds in preserving the appearance of normality that is so important to him?

5. Why did Jason prevent Caddy from seeing her own daughter, Miss Quentin? How would you describe Jason's mode of thinking and reasoning?

6. Mrs. Compson says approvingly that Jason is more Bascomb (her family) than Compson (her husband's). Is this really such a compliment? How do you perceive Mrs. Compson's relationship with her children?

7. While Caddy is presented as maternal and promiscuous, she is also unknowable, given that she can only be glimpsed in the rather unreliable narrations of her brothers. Does she appeal to you as a sympathetic character? Is Caddy's fall the cause of the family tragedy or is she just another child-victim of the abdication of parental responsibility?

8. In which characters, if any, do we find love, honor, loyalty, strength? Is Jason the embodiment of the opposite traits? How does Caddy's daughter, Quentin, fit into the scheme of value here? Do Benjy's perceptions function as a sort of touchstone for the reader?

Dilsey's Section Page 265 to the end

1. With each section the narrative voice becomes more coherent, and we finish with a fairly straightforward and traditional third-person voice. Why do you think Faulkner has chosen to present things in this way and in this order? What is the effect on the narration?

2. The events in this chapter transpire on Easter Sunday. Is there any significance—a theme of rebirth, for instance—to this?

3. Though by the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, the past glory of the Compson family—built on bedrock Southern values—has dissipated, Dilsey's resolve remains. What about her personality enables her strength?

4. Why isn't Dilsey ashamed of Benjy?

5. Why won't the sheriff help Jason search for Miss Quentin? Is Jason more concerned about Miss Quentin running away, or the money she took?

6. Although this section isn't told from the first person, the third person narration favors Dilsey's perspective. It is also the closest we come to hearing a female voice in the novel. Why do you think Faulkner chose not to have Dilsey, Caddy, Caroline, or Miss Quentin narrate her own section? What do you think they might have said?

7. Is there any hope for a renewal of the Compson family or is *The Sound and the Fury* a Southern Shakespearean tragedy?

8. What would you say this novel is "about"? Think again about the Macbeth quotation—"[life] is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing." What does Faulkner's tale, told four times, signify?