

Time And History In William Faulkner's The Sound And The Fury

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Abstract

In **The Sound and the Fury** the typical concern of the modernist novel -- the disjunctive relation between inner time and external history -- is well to the fore, but in their influential interpretations Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Pouillon assert that the novel is concerned only with the past and that for Faulkner's characters only the past is real. However, by paying attention to the novel as a whole, we can see that Faulkner's goal is to express time in its totality and its significance in human life.

The destructive influence of history upon the Compsons manifests itself clearly in the ways in which they are out of touch with contemporary (ie. late 1920s) mores and behaviour, and Faulkner uses his four protagonists, Quentin, Jason, Benjy and Dilsey, to present four highly individualized perceptions of time: Quentin, about to commit suicide, has no future and the present is absorbed into the past; Jason constantly reaches out to the future, caring only for what has not yet happened; Benjy inhabits a sphere of "unitime" in which past, present and future are undifferentiated; and Dilsey balances a belief in eternal life with an interest confined solely to the present. These four figures, therefore, represent various aspects of the human experience of time, both of inner time and clock time.

Finally, the disjunction between subjective and objective time is manifested in the apparently violated chronology of the novel, but closer reading reveals that Faulkner has substituted the apparent order of calendar dated with the real order of psychological chronology. Thus, **The Sound and the Fury** takes time as its theme, presenting and scrutinizing it in its various aspects, and subordinating mechanical historical time to the interior time of the psyche.

William Faulkner had written two novels (**Soldier's Pay** and **Mosquitoes**, 1927) before he discovered in **Sartoris** (1929) his own unique subject, his own especial literary territory, the saga of Yoknapatawpha County, a Mississippi equivalent of Thomas Hardy's Wessex. In **Sartoris** the presentation is fairly conventional and realist in its aesthetic as a localized society is depicted in all its full variety. But in **The Sound and the Fury** published the same year Faulkner abandoned traditional narrative strategies in favour of a full-blown experimental modernism in which the typical concern of the modernist novel -- the disjunctive relationship between inner time and external history -- is well to the fore. (Mendilow, 1952) The novel is divided into four sections, each dated but as will be apparent not arranged in chronological order: "April Seventh, 1928" "June Second, 1910," "April Sixth, 1928," and "April Eighth, 1928;" and each section articulates the viewpoint of a single character -- Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey respectively. Within the sections there are temporal references such as the one to Benjy's thirty - third birthday in the first and the one to Easter Sunday in the fourth which link the personal time of the narratives to external calendar time.

Jean-Paul Sartre's "A propos de **Le Bruit et la Fureur**. La temporalité chez Faulkner," Published in 1939 has heavily influenced the discussion of time in the novel with its assertion that **The Sound and the Fury** is concerned only with the past. "The present does not exist, it becomes; everything **was**," Sartre says, and he adds that Faulkner's "preoccupation with the past is so strong that he sometimes disguises the present -- and the present makes its way in the shadows, like the underground river, to reappear only when it has become the past," (Sartre, 1963: 228) Sartre's comparison of Faulkner's hero to "a man sitting in a convertible looking back" deprives him not only of the present, but also of the future understood as a rational projection of the present. While he insists that Faulkner's only domain of time is the past, Sartre recognizes that "man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, of what he could have." (Sartre, 1963: 231 - 2) He concludes his analysis by referring to Faulkner's vision of time as "absurdity". This interpretation is reiterated in Jean Pouillon's classic analysis of time in the novel in which he says, "We must conclude -- and this lies at the core of Faulkner -- that it is the past which is real," and "Faulkner's people are real only in their pasts (Pouillon, 1966: 80 - 82). Ever since these influential readings the conviction that **The Sound and the Fury** is submerged in the past has dominated Faulkner criticism.

This opinion may be justified with regard to historical time, but it is much less convincing when related to the psychological time of the novel's protagonists. Sartre with his emphasis on Quentin's narrative and Pouillon with his emphasis on the Benjy section unjustifiably generalized statements about parts of the book into conclusions about the whole. My argument here will be that there exists an overall time structure to **The Sound and the Fury** in which all the sections are mutually complementary and inseparable and that it is only against this whole that we can evaluate each part. This is in turn subordinated to Faulkner's primary goal in the novel which is to express time itself and its significance in human life. To achieve this he turned time into the central theme of the novel while ostensibly laying bare the history of the Compson family. To briefly adumbrate, his treatment of time can be broken down into several key elements: time as history that determines the characters' behaviour; time as the main factor shaping their psyches; the felt experience of time as a means

of characterizing a human being; and the disordering of chronology and other technical devices in the narration. Each of these elements is important for understanding Faulkner's meaning and deserves a separate discussion

The destructive influence of history upon the Compsons manifests itself very clearly and has been observed by many critics. Cleanth Brooks remarks, for instance, that the family would not have been in such a state of dissolution if their ideals and behaviour patterns had not been obsolete and did not fit the times in which the last generation of the Compsons lived: neither the magical significance of virginity nor their shame at sending an idiot child (Benjy) to an institution conformed to the changing norms of the world at large (Brooks, 1963: 341 - 42). We should recall perhaps that three quarters of the novel is set in 1928, three years after the Charleston was invented, one year after Charles Lindbergh flew from New York to Paris, one year after sound movies were popularized with Al Jolson's **The Jazz Singer**, and just one year before the Wall Street boom and subsequent crash. In the light of 'the Jazz Age' more such instances of a time mismatch become apparent. The sexual extravagance of Caddy, the Compson daughter, manifesting perhaps the greater liberation of the twentieth-century woman, belies the traditional purity of the Southern belle and leads the family to reject her. Mrs Compson with her old-fashioned pride in the Bascomb family name and her refusal to accept money off a "fallen woman" (Caddy) clearly lives in a different era, quite out of touch with modernity. Quentin's unpleasant encounter with the Italians in Boston is brought about by his inability to communicate with the new immigrants. And while Jason buys a car, an obvious symbol of contemporary American life as shaped by Henry Ford's mass production techniques, he cannot really drive it as he is allergic to gasoline. Thus **The Sound and the Fury** presents a family misfitted to its times and partially destroyed by the discrepancy. This could not but have a serious impact on the characters' psychology. Even more important, however, is the fact that their perception of time is individualized as Faulkner uses his protagonists, Quentin, Jason, Benjy, and Dilsey, to present a variety of human responses to oppressive time.

Quentin is the character most fascinated with time. As the most educated member of the family (Harvard) and the only one conscious of time as a separate philosophical category, he is able to grasp the essence of what befalls the Compsons, but he also realizes that they cannot avoid the inevitable. This realization leads him to suicide, but it also enlarges his understanding of time. Quentin recalls his father's words: "[He] said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life."⁽¹⁾ In order to make "time come to life" Quentin destroys his watch in a scene that expresses the dramatic quality of his last day as he tries to escape from the tyranny of mechanical time and make absolute time his only dimension. Yet, characteristically, Quentin stops halfway. He destroys the hands of his watch but leaves the clockwork intact, so the time is still measured by "the clicking of little wheels". The subsequent conversation with the watchmaker points up the relativity of mechanical time measurements but it does not solve Quentin's predicament:

"Would you mind telling me if any of those watches in the window are right?"...

"No. But they haven't been regulated and set yet..."

There were about a dozen watches in the window, a dozen different

hours and each with the same assertive and contradictory assurance that mine had, without any hands at all. (p. 80)

Quentin does not want to know "what time it is." He leaves the city so that he will not hear the church bell ringing the hours, and when he reaches the suburbs he wants to make sure there are no factory whistles in the vicinity. However, he still keeps listening to his own watch clicking away, as if to prove to himself that it is impossible to stop it and make "time come to life," Yet, stopping the watch was the only way to avoid his self-destruction.

History has brought about the decay of the Compson family symbolized by "the square, paintless house with its rotting portico" (p. 264) and this in turn has brought about Quentin's decision to commit suicide. To negate the possibility of measuring time would be tantamount to rejecting historical time, and thus, indirectly, to altering the meaning of the planned suicide. For, according to Peter Swiggart, "Quentin wants to live forever in the moment when consciousness still exists but when time, which alone can bring death, has been forever stopped. In this abstract moment, a defeated or dead time will release the full potentiality of the human self, and in this sense be paradoxically alive" (swiggart, 1962: 95). This is indeed what Quentin wishes to achieve, but unable to go beyond half-measures, he is defeated. That he never doubted he would fail is best seen in his recollection of Father passing on to him Grandfather's watch, a recollection which opens his section of the novel: "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" (p. 73). Indeed, no other member of the family even tries to fight time, which sets Quentin apart from them. Yet their positions with regard to time are highly individualized and constitute an integral part of their psychology.

Jason is a small-time businessman whose antagonism towards Quentin arises not only from his jealousy of Quentin's university education but also from his attitude towards time. Unlike his father and Quentin he has no use for philosophical discourse and in the classic American pattern of Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard thinks of time only in terms of money (lowrey, 1954:76). For him the monthly rhythm is marked not by the calendar but by the cheques he receives from his sister, Caddy, and when one is late as we learn (p. 171) the March one is six days late his time order is upset. In addition, while for Quentin the time registered by clocks was untrue, for Jason it has an unquestioned veracity. He believes that men may, and do, lie, but in his emotionless world mechanisms are the ideals which unfailingly dictate man's rhythm, It is therefore most significant for our interpretation of Jason that these unfailing clocks keep indicating that Jason is constantly late. There are numerous references to clock time in his section and he is portrayed as always being in a hurry, but the results of this constant rush, usually after money, are almost invariably futile. Being permanently late, Jason Keeps making losses: cotton market information comes too late for him to take appropriate action and he loses his investment (p. 217); when he wants to revile his broker, he learns that the exchange closed an hour before (p.218); busy with a customer, he is late in preventing his niece from seeing her mother's (Caddy's) letter which costs him money (p. 191); and the final delay in starting his pursuit of his runaway niece costs him all his fortune (pp.267-72). Jason

desperately wants to live in the present, to participate in, as well as shape his world, but his efforts are made ineffective by his previous scheming and he cannot regain the lost dimension of the present.

While Quentin's time was a continuum that could not be broken and Jason's is a series of disconnected moments among which he cannot find himself, Benjy's time can best be characterized as chaotic randomness. Since he is a congenital idiot without any powers of reasoning, scenes from the present as well as the distant and immediate past appear in his consciousness without any indication that he can distinguish between them:

We came to the broken place and went through it.

"Wait a minute," Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Can't you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail,"

Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through....Keep Your hands in Your Pockets, Caddy said. Or they'll get froze. You don't want Your hands froze on Christmas do you.

"It's too cold out there," Versh said, "You don't want to go out doors," (p.12)

The adoption of italics indicates a shift of time to the reader, so that as in the example the italicized lines alert us to the scene's existence in the past, or alternatively Faulkner uses italics to indicate a scene in the present if it interrupts a long sequence from the past. The principle governing the movement of Benjy's consciousness from the present to the immediate and the distant past is that of mental association.

Thus the golfers calling "caddie" summons up in Benjy's mind "Caddy", the loving sister of his childhood, and Caddy's reference to perfume brings the association of smell, "**She smelled like trees,**" which repeated later in turn calls to mind "We looked into the tree where she was" (pp. 45-6). Although, therefore, Benjy inhabits a perpetual present, he does not have a conscious attitude towards time and there is little more to say about this aspect of him. His monologue, however, is an important element in Faulkner's overall vision of time, a subject to deal with below.

Dilsey, the central character of the fourth section, has spent all her life as Negro cook with the Compsons and is now their only uniting force. Yet she is not really a member of the family and has therefore been less affected by historical time. She is the only one who is adjusted to the times she lives in, and her relation to clock time is also extremely significant:

On the wall above the cupboard, invisible save at night, by lamp
Light and even then evincing an enigmatic profundity because it had
but one hand, a cabinet clock ticked, then with a preliminary sound
as if it had cleared its throat, struck five time.

"Eight o'clock," Dilsey said. (pp. 243 -4)

The scene's symbolism is complex and is related not only to Dilsey but also, retrospectively, provides a commentary on the relationship between the Compson brothers and time. Dilsey's ability to read the correct time despite the clock's misleading indications contrasts with the treatment of clock time by both Quentin and Jason. The former wished to convince himself that clock time is not the real time, while the latter believed in the infallibility of mechanisms. Dilsey knows that her clock does not

tell the true time but she also understands the relation between its time and reality. An additional parallel with Quentin is provided by the fact that Dilsey's clock lacks one hand. Finally, Dilsey's day is structured by the clock, while Benjy does not realize the flow of time at all. The scene is also symbolic for the whole novel with its description of the clock "evincing an enigmatic profundity" and being "invisible", even though this does not prevent it from controlling the rhythm of the day.

Each of the four main characters can thus be said to experience time in a different manner, but even more fundamental than the experience of time however is the issue of its nature, of whether Faulkner's characters are indeed confined to the past. It is here that Faulkner's philosophy of time manifests itself, and can be discerned by defining the protagonists' position in time.

Benjy's monologue, the first section of the novel, reveals that for him past scenes and present experiences are indistinct from one another. Also, since he is unable to follow cause-and-effect reasoning Benjy does not understand the future, But does it follow that his monologue takes place in the past? On the surface such a conclusion seems justified for all events, even those taking place during the day of the monologue (April Seventh, 1928), are presented as past, as if some time elapses between the instant they actually happen and Benjy's realization of them, thus changing "is" into "was": "They were hitting little, across the pasture. I went back along the fence to where the flag was. It flapped on the bright grass and the trees" (p. 12). Yet, paradoxically it also helps reject the thesis of an all-embracing past. For if there is neither future nor clearly delineated present and everything takes place in the same time undivided in any manner, it cannot be called the past since this notion implies the existence of other spheres of time. In Benjy's monologue there are no such separate areas, and even his "past" is not differentiated into "what just happened" and "what happened along time ago". The same reservation applies to Sartre's essay, where he employs "external" concepts of "future" and "present" to describe the world he claims is deprived of them. It seems that if we cannot speak of separate spheres of past, present, and future-- and in the case of Benjy's monologue we certainly cannot-- then we should adopt another term such as "unitime", for instance, rather than stretch the concept of the past beyond its generally recognized limits.

The second section, dealing with the day of Quentin's suicide, presents a different problem. Quentin's decision is not the result of a momentary impulse but of careful planning and reasoning: it is the only solution to his problems that agrees with his norms of behaviour. Psychologically, he has been outside life since the moment he made his decision; only the physical act remains to be done: "I will look down and see my murmuring bones and the deep water like wind, like a roof of wind, and after a long time they cannot distinguish even bones upon this lonely and inviolate sand" (p. 76). His narrative communicates a tone of finality through its minute registering of detail as if everything is being seen for the last time and through the steady execution of his preparations. Making his decision cannot but affect his attitude towards time, for he has placed himself in a situation which leaves him with no choice and eliminates the future. Furthermore, having already committed the psychological act of suicide, he not only destroyed all "will be" but also transformed "is" into "was". Quentin is left with no future and no present, only the past. In his case, however, it is a consciously assumed time sphere and is clearly divided into " what just happened ",

“what happened some time ago”, and “what happened along time ago”. Therefore, it is different from Benjy’s “unitime” in that it is an enlarged, yet clearly outlined and structured sphere of time.

That this is indeed the case, that after the future had been removed the present was also absorbed by the past is dramatized by the fight Quentin engages in a few hours before his death. He goes through it as if he were fighting Dalton Ames, Caddy’s seducer, a fight which took place several years before. It is only after the fight is over that we learn Quentin has actually been fighting Gerald Bland, a companion he has met during the day, and has not been simply remembering a past event (p.150). There is no fight in the present because it does not exist for Quentin: for him the old fight with Ames is the only real one. Quentin is thus deprived of both the present and the future and is left with only the past .

In the third section, centred on Jason, Faulkner is less direct in his treatment of time but the symbolism is clear enough, the main motif being the cheque sent to Jason by Caddy. Its arrival on the day of action, April Sixth, signifies the present, but, as already mentioned, the cheque is six days late. So, when related to Jason’s time frame, the present is dislocated “forward” -- what should have been in the past is still the present. This has consequences which reach into the future. As a result of Jason’s complicated financial dealings, Caddy’s monthly cheques have to arrive on time if Mother is not to learn about his dishonesty and, accordingly, Jason is worried about the future consequences of delay: “And like as not, when they sent the bank statement out, [Mother] would want to know why I never deposited my salary until the sixth” (p.172). In other words, any dislocation in the past, as well as any change in the present, has a future significance for Jason. Throughout his monologue Jason reaches into the future, caring only about what has not happened yet. As Cleanth Brooks says, Jason is characterized by “his rejection of the past and his constant gaze into future” (Brooks, 1963: 330). Constantly on the lookout for new openings, Jason is yet unable, when the time comes, to accomplish anything. He does not realize that the future cannot be reached but he keeps attempting to reach it and failing. Deprived of both the past and the present he can live only in the future, which lacks the dimension of action: “by insisting on seeing time only with regard to something to be done, he is incapable of any real living” (Brooks, 1963:330)

No such problems plague Dilsey, who exists in full harmony with the world, if not with all the Compsons. She can do this because she finds solace in the concept of eternal life, in enduring the earthly for the sake of what is certain to follow:

My name been Dilsey since fore I could remember and it be Dilsey when they’s long forgot me.

How will they know it’s Dilsey, when it’s long forgot, Dilsey, Caddy said.

It’ll be in the Book, honey, Dilsey said. Writ out.

Can you read it, Caddy said.

Won’t have to, Dilsey said. They’ll read it for me. All I got to do is say Ise here. (p.58)

Yet she is not alienated from this world or its time which for her is clearly divided into distinct spheres of past, present and future. This does not mean, however, that they are all equally important to her. The past is reflection; the future an analysis of possibilities. But Dilsey is not interested in either: she notices the past only insofar as it

conditions the present; the future exists only as projection of the present. Aside from eternity she is interested only in "now", in what is happening around her at the moment. Her time is thus primarily the present. The past and future exist to outline its limits, but they have no real significance for her.

The four main characters of **The Sound and the Fury**, Benjy, Quentin, Jason and Dilsey, can be seen therefore as representing various aspects of human time from "unitime" to eternity, with the past, present and future each being the theme of one of the novel's sections. Together, they can be interpreted as composing a hypothetical collective figure who is equipped with the complete range of time rather than, in Sartre's words, "sitting in a convertible looking back". This, however, does not preclude a conflict between this figure's potential and the possibility of realizing it, for the tragic dimension of Faulkner's characters lies in their being unable to realize their potential, not in their being deprived of it altogether.

This conflict between the subjective and the objective also manifests itself in another fundamental aspect of the novel--its chronology. It is usually considered to be seriously violated by Faulkner and some critics even claim that "Faulkner refuses chronological time" (pouillon, 1966: 82). This assertion is based on the order of the four sections, as already indicated-- April Seventh, 1928, June Second 1910, April Sixth, 1928, and April Eighth, 1928. Moreover, since Faulkner uses interior monologue, the "real" time palne of the novel keeps moving backward, frequently by more than twenty years. It appears, however, that this apparent chaos is only meant to obscure, and thus draw our attention to, a deeper chronological structure.

While it is obvious that Faulkner "did not first think in terms of an orderly narrative and then shuffle the parts like a pack of cards (sarte, 1963:226), it is legitimate to ask why Faulkner shuffled the dates and why he put the sections in this particular order. It is legitimate, that is, until we realized that the chronology of events is not violated at all. What Faulkner has done is to substitute the apparent order of dates with the real order of psychological chronology. Events referred to in Benjy's monologue (th first section) take place mostly between 1898 and 1912, but particular emphasis is laid on the years 1898 to 1906, as we can pick up from cues in the text, such as those to Caddy's age (pp. 23,43) and Benjy's age (pp. II,62). Quentin's section deals basically with 1906 to 1910, and Jason's 1910 (from Quentin's suicide) through April Sixth, 1928, while Dilsey's section, the last, concentrates on April Eighth, 1928. By unsettling the apparent chronology Faulkner forced the reader to notice the special role of time in the novel, and by juxtaposing the two orders-- the apparent and the real--he highlighted the difference between time measured and time experienced. In all stream-of-consciousness fiction time experienced, "time of the mind", plays a central role in governing the pace of narration. Faulkner's innovation was to make psychological time supercede all other time categories and outline the fundamental chronology of the novel, since the narration progresses more according to the experienced "time of the mind" than to measured, calendar and clock time.

"Never perhaps have our feelings about time changed so radically and assumed such importance in our eyes as in this century", writes A.A. Mendilow, and there is abundant evidence to support this view (Mendilow , 1952: 3) James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, T.S.Eliot and Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann and William Faulkner all recognized the centrality of time in the worlds they created. **The Sound and the Fury**

takes time as its theme rather than as a narrative dimension, presents and scrutinizes time in its various aspects, and subordinates mechanical, historical time to the interior time of the psyche.

Note:

- 1 · William Faulkner, **The Sound and the Fury**, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964 P. 80. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this edition.

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