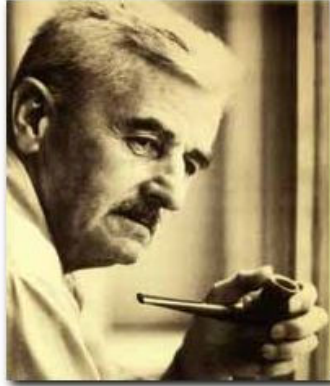


THE SOUND AND THE FURY

by William Faulkner



THE AUTHOR

William Faulkner (1897-1962) was born in New Albany, Mississippi, and later moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where he lived for most of his life. The town and the surrounding countryside became the model for his fictitious Yoknapatawpha County, the setting for most of his fiction.

Faulkner never finished high school, but with the outbreak of World War I sought to enlist in the Air Force. He was rejected because of his height (5'6"), but succeeded in joining the Royal Air Force of Canada by lying about much of his background. The war ended before his training was completed, however, though this did not stop him from purchasing a lieutenant's uniform and telling a variety of tales about his wartime adventures after he returned home to Oxford.

After the war, he enrolled at the University of Mississippi, where he began writing for the campus newspaper. He dropped out during his sophomore year, and began writing on his own while working odd jobs to support himself. In 1925, he moved to New Orleans to write for a literary magazine, and published his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, the following year. After the failure of his second novel, he took the advice of playwright Sherwood Anderson and turned to writing about the country he knew best. This third novel, *Sartoris*, was finally published in 1929, but only after being rejected by several publishers and drastically edited by the one who finally accepted it. Fed up with the publishing business, Faulkner decided to write a novel purely for his own enjoyment. The result was *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel written in an unorthodox, even revolutionary, style, which, contrary to his expectations, his publisher loved. When it came out in 1929, the public agreed, and it is still considered by many to be his finest novel. Between the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 and *Go Down, Moses* in 1942, Faulkner went through a period of amazing creative productivity, publishing such novels as *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom*, along with a number of short stories and Hollywood screenplays. Later, he wrote his famous Snopes trilogy, *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959), which deal with the rising middle class in the South rather than the old aristocracy that was the subject of the earlier works.

As far as his personal life was concerned, Faulkner married his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham, in 1929, after her divorce from her first husband. She brought two children into the marriage, and they had two daughters together, one of whom died in infancy. Despite several affairs throughout his life, he and Estelle remained together. Faulkner won two Pulitzer Prizes, for *A Fable* (1955) and *The Reivers* (1962), both of which are considered among his lesser works, and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959. Many of his novels deal with issues of race and class, and he became an outspoken opponent of segregation later in his career.

PLOT SUMMARY

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is a very difficult novel to read, largely because of the extensive use of flashback and stream-of-consciousness techniques. The novel itself is an account of the decline of the aristocratic Compson family, and consists of four parts, each narrated by a different person.

The first part of the novel is narrated by Benjy Compson, a thirty-three year old man with the mind of a three year old, and takes place in 1928. Benjy has no sense of time or place, and understands little more than sensory impressions. When these occur, they send him suddenly into often random flashbacks. Events alluded to in this section include the funeral of his grandmother (1898), his sister Caddy's use of perfume (1905), loss of her virginity (1909), and wedding (1910), his brother Quentin's suicide (1910), and his own name change (from Maury to Benjy - 1900) and castration (1910).

The second part is narrated by Quentin Compson, and takes place on the day of his suicide in 1910. He is a student at Harvard at the time, and has meticulously planned to drown himself because he cannot deal with the shame brought on the family by Caddy's sexual activity. This part of the novel details the events prior to Quentin's throwing himself in the river, and repeatedly introduces images of time and shadows, alluding to Shakespeare's soliloquy from which the title of the novel was taken.

The third part of the novel is narrated by the third Compson brother, Jason. It involves fewer flashbacks than the first two sections, and is written in a much more straightforward style. It brings us back to Good Friday, 1928, and is concerned largely with Jason's attempts to prevent Quentin (Caddy's illegitimate daughter) from skipping school in order to have a rendezvous with a man from a traveling circus. Throughout the narrative, Jason shows himself to be a cruel, complaining schemer who resents the fact that Caddy's unfaithfulness cost him the opportunity for a job with her husband. He also is keeping for himself the money Caddy sends to support Quentin.

The fourth part of the novel is narrated by the author from an omniscient perspective, and takes place on Easter Sunday in 1928. The two major events narrated are Jason's unsuccessful attempt to retrieve \$7000 stolen from him by Quentin when she runs off with the man from the circus, and Dilsey's trip to an Easter Sunday church service with Benjy and some of the servants. In 1945, Faulkner added an appendix detailing the histories of key figures in the Compson genealogy, while also filling in some of the details of their later lives.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Jason Compson III - The father of the Compson clan, a cynical man who drinks himself to death the year after his son's suicide.
- Caroline Compson - The sickly and self-pitying mother of the clan.
- Quentin Compson - The oldest of the Compson siblings, he is sensitive, intelligent, and loves his sister and his family's honor. The family sells off pastureland to send him away to college, but his inability to deal with Caddy's promiscuity drives him to drown himself near the end of his freshman year at Harvard.
- Jason Compson IV - The second brother, he is mean and vicious. He resents Quentin for committing suicide after the family has impoverished themselves to send him to college, resents Caddy because she cost him his promised job and because he got stuck caring for her daughter, and resents Benjy because he sees him as nothing but a burden. He winds up working in a farm supply store, stealing the money sent by Caddy to support her daughter, and ineffectually tyrannizing the family over which he becomes the head by default.
- Candace "Caddy" Compson - The only girl in the Compson family, she is very close to Quentin, despised by Jason, and almost a mother to Benjy. She becomes promiscuous during her teen years, and is impregnated (probably by Dalton Ames), then quickly marries Sydney Herbert Head, who divorces her as soon as he finds she is carrying another man's child. She is then ostracized from the family, with whom she leaves her young daughter. The support money she sends is stolen by Jason for speculating on the stock market and to pad his personal bank account.
- Benjy Compson - The youngest of the clan, he is severely mentally retarded. When he is five years old, his parents change his name from Maury to Benjamin because the former was a family name, and they don't want it disgraced. He has no power of speech, but is deeply attached to his sister Caddy, who is like a mother figure to him. At the age of fifteen, he is castrated because his family thought he tried to rape a girl along the road. Jason ultimately sends him away to an insane asylum, where he dies a few years later.
- Miss Quentin - Caddy's illegitimate daughter, an unhappy, rebellious, promiscuous girl who finally steals \$7000 that Jason has hoarded in his room and runs off with a man from a traveling carnival.
- Dilsey - The Compsons' black cook, whose faith enables her to hold the family together when everything is crumbling around them.
- Maury Bascomb - Caroline's brother, who lives off his brother-in-law's money.
- Versh, T.P., Luster - Black servants who at various times have the responsibility of caring for Benjy.

- Dalton Ames - Caddy's first love, who probably impregnates her before her wedding.
- Sydney Herbert Head - Caddy's husband, who divorces her shortly after the wedding when he finds she is pregnant with another man's child.
- The man with the red tie - The carnival employee with whom Miss Quentin runs away.
- Shreve MacKenzie - Quentin's roommate at Harvard.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.” (Benjy, p.1)

“When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. 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.” (Quentin, p.93)

“Once a b---- always a b----, what I say. I says you're lucky if her playing out of school is all that worries you. I says she ought to be down there in that kitchen right now, instead of up there in her room, gobbing paint on her face and waiting for six n-----s that cant even stand up out of a chair unless they've got a pan full of bread and meat to balance them, to fix breakfast for her.” (Jason, p.223)

“I seed de first en de last.” (Dilsey, p.375)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the protagonist delivers this soliloquy near the end of his life:

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.

In what ways does this soliloquy, from which the title was taken, express key themes in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*?

2. How does the use of a stream-of-consciousness writing style in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* contribute to the effectiveness of the work? What does this technique reveal to the reader that might not be uncovered through a more straightforward style of narration?
3. Many critics have suggested that the style of writing used in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* closely approximates the way our minds really work, and thus provides a better window into human nature than would be achieved through a straightforward sequential narrative. Do you agree? Why or why not? Use specific incidents from the book to support your argument.
4. William Faulkner deals with issues of race and class in many of his novels and short stories, and in his later years, he became an outspoken opponent of segregation. What does *The Sound and the Fury*, which was published in 1929, indicate about his attitude toward racial matters early in his life? Use specific incidents in the book to answer the question, but please avoid getting bogged down in the use of terms that are now considered pejorative, but which were not viewed that way at the time when the book was written.
5. Critic Perry Westbrook argued that William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* was a Calvinistic novel because it presented in each of its major characters a soul that acts in free will on its perverted desires, though it is impossible to imagine them doing anything else. Do you agree with his assessment? What is the basic view of human nature portrayed by Faulkner in this work?

6. Benjy, the youngest Compson son and the narrator of the first part of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, is clearly linked by the author to the character of Benjamin in the Bible. In what ways are the two similar? What was Faulkner trying to communicate through this link?
7. Because most of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* takes place on Easter weekend in 1928, and because Benjy, the narrator of the first part of the novel, is said to be thirty-three years old, some critics have found in him a Christ figure. Do you agree that, for Faulkner, Benjy was a symbol of Christ? If so, in what ways is this true?
8. Quentin Compson views his sister Caddy as being predestined to damnation because of her sexual promiscuity, and seeks to join her forever by means of his suicide. His view of life centers on doom with no hope of salvation. What can you discern from his portion of the narrative in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* that would indicate that his faulty understanding of Christianity contributes to his own, and his family's, tragedy?
9. Critic Donald Kartiganer argues that Jason Compson, the narrator of the third section of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, drives himself to destruction because he is unable to reconcile his notions of free will and predestination - "standing between him and reality is his need to hold on to two opposing views of himself: one is that he is completely sufficient, the other that he is the scapegoat of the world." In what ways do you see the same tendency in modern society, with its contradictory obsessions with self-determination and victimhood? What warnings does Jason provide for a society so obsessed?
10. In William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, in what sense is the character of Jason Compson purely negative, in that he determines the affairs of his life in reaction against those of his three siblings?
11. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had their own version of the Prosperity Gospel. Many believed that material prosperity was a sign of God's blessing, and that the way to demonstrate that one belonged to God's family was to accumulate wealth. After all, no one would ever question that God loved one whom He was clearly blessing with this world's goods. In what ways does the character of Jason Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* illustrate this perversion of Christian truth, along with its consequences?
12. Discuss the notion that William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* portrays a biblical view of sin without a biblical view of redemption.
13. The concept of time is a very important one in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Discuss the idea that Dilsey is the only character who is able to live with contentment in the present because her concept of time encompasses eternity as well as this life.

14. With the ending of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the cruel, materialistic Jason appears to have won out over the innocence of Benjy and the Christian faith of Dilsey. Why does Faulkner portray faith as ultimately impotent? What does this tell you about Faulkner's understanding of the meaning of life and the nature of reality? Does the fact that the appendix, written thirteen years after the publication of the novel, speaks of Dilsey as "enduring" when the rest of the characters have followed their own destructive paths, change your understanding of Faulkner's vision? What about the fact that the reader of the novel does not *want* Jason to win, but is instead moved to sympathize with Dilsey as the only admirable character in the entire novel?
15. In William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he said, "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.... He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." How does *The Sound and the Fury*, with its portrayal of the destruction of the doomed Compson clan in contrast to the enduring faith of Dilsey, illustrate Faulkner's view of the nature of man?
16. Many have argued that the main character in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is Caddy, the promiscuous sister who is given no voice in the novel. Would you agree that she is the central focus of the narrative? Why or why not? If not, who do you believe is the main character of the book?
17. In what ways do the stylistic elements of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* parallel the artistic techniques popular among painters in the nineteen twenties?