

# COMPREHENDING THE MODERN PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL 'THE SOUND AND THE FURY' BY WILLIAM FAULKNER

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## ABSTRAK

*Novel sebagai salah satu jenis karya sastra sekaligus juga sebagai saksi dari perubahan di dalam masyarakat juga dapat berfungsi sebagai metode untuk memahami modernitas. Dalam hal ini, muncul novel modern psikologis yang mewakili kategori fungsi novel tersebut. Dalam penelitian ini ditelaah salah satu novel yang sering dikategorikan sebagai novel modern psikologis, yaitu "The Sound and the Fury" karya William Faulkner. Metode yang dipakai dalam penelitian ini adalah studi kepustakaan yang mana fokusnya adalah menelaah karya memanfaatkan literatur-literatur yang relevan. Konsep-konsep tentang modernitas, psikologi, dan teknik arus kesadaran (stream of consciousness) dimanfaatkan untuk dapat menelaah secara mendalam novel ini. Khusus untuk teknik arus kesadaran, teknik ini terbukti cukup dominan di dalam jenis novel ini.*

**Kata Kunci:** *novel modern psikologis, modernitas, psikologi, arus kesadaran.*

## 1. Introduction

### Modernism and William Faulkner

The accelerated pace of change, resulted from the Industrial Revolution, created a breeding ground for a modernist writings that took shape in the early twentieth century. Rapid social change was reflected in arts especially in how writers expressed a chaotic condition and loss of certainty, mostly in dark ways, abrupt break with all tradition. The impact on literature of these losses was expressed in the work of writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot, who are labeled with Faulkner as high modernists.

Between 1913 and 1915, the modern psychological novel was born. Another name was the stream of consciousness novel or novel of silence. It offered the hidden world of fantasy and isolation from external stimuli that the mind plays over past and present. There was no plot. Above all, this kind of novel seemed to turn the readers into an author.

Speaking of this kind of novel, we can't simply ignore the existence of William Faulkner, one of the best authors in the twentieth century. And, nothing in William Faulkner's writings has received more critical attention than his fourth novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, which is called as a major period of his literary career. The novel's stunning technical innovations partially account for this attention, because the difficulty of reading and understanding this text is somehow compatible with being moved by it.

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Faulkner expresses the loss of certainty, in terms of breakdowns of meaning, structure, and origin, putting the reader in the position of seeking to integrate what is broken. Leon Edel describes how to understand and to comprehend Faulkner's work.

“We have, in effect, been thrown bodily into scene and narrative; the author has withdrawn, as in play, to allow us to figure things out for ourselves. He placed us neither in a labyrinth nor a puzzle: we are merely in an unfamiliar landscape, as if we had journeyed in foreign country, and we are asked to use Benjy's eyes and ears and nose, indeed all his sense as well as our to determine where we are” (Edel, 1964 p. 166).

Faulkner used modernist techniques such as stream of consciousness, interior monologues, and multiple narrative points of view to make his work distinctive, and outstanding. Stream of consciousness was used by Faulkner to set out humanistic representation toward style, and technique.

First published in 1929, *The Sound and the Fury* is recognized as one of the most successfully innovative and experimental American novels of its time, not to mention one of the most challenging to interpret. The novel concerns the downfall of the Compsons, who have been a prominent family in Jefferson, Mississippi, since before the Civil War. Faulkner represents the human experience by portraying events and images subjectively, through several different characters' respective memories of childhood. The novel's stream of consciousness style is frequently very opaque, as events are sometimes obscured and narrated out of order.

Despite its complexity, *The Sound and the Fury* is a deeply moving novel. It is generally regarded as Faulkner's most important and remarkable literary work.

## **2. Methodology**

This research use quality research method as the research method. Data is collected by reading literatures that are related to the research. The primary data is the work. Meanwhile, the secondary data is comprised of any related reference including books that can help formulate the theoretical framework of the research.

## **3. Review of Literature**

### **3.1. Modernity of a Novel**

There are two terms characterizing modern psychological novel or stream of consciousness novel or novel of silence. They are modernity and psychology. As for modernity, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane states that:

“Modernity is a new consciousness, a fresh condition of human mind- a condition which modern art has explored, felt through, sometimes reacted against.” (1976: 22).

They also add that the movement toward sophistication and mannerism, toward introversion, technical display, internal self skepticism, has often been taken as a common base for a definition of modernism (1976: 26). Modernism indeed, is a revolutionary movement to capitalize a vast intellectual readjustment and radical dissatisfaction with the artistic past.

Marshall Berman in Stonely (2007: 97) also gives definition about modernism, which offered greatness and destruction:

“To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are”.

He also points out that fiction captures both the negative and positive energies associated with modernity, not least because it both draws upon and critiques the socioeconomic processes as intrinsic to modernity:

“...demographic movements (for example, immigration and migration), industrialization, growth of cities, technological advances, and, above all, the extraordinary expansion of the capitalist market” (Stonely, 2007: 112).

Then, all these chaotic revenues are absorbed in fictions in a new way unlike the previous works before.

### **3.2. Stream of Consciousness Techniques**

The psychological aspects of a novel are more or less manifested by the stream of consciousness techniques in the creation of it. Stream of consciousness (a term coined by the philosopher William James) refers to the recording of the flow of a character’s thoughts in a fragmentary, nonlinear manner. Images and impressions suggest others through an associative process that ignores distinctions between past, present, and future (in Moreland, 2007: 68).

Robert Humphrey also points out that stream-of-consciousness techniques encompass various levels or degrees of consciousness, ranging from unconscious, preverbal depths to levels of conscious verbalization, whether written or spoken. Presentation of character via images that stream through consciousness matched the modernist concept of incoherent and fragmented selfhood. Interior monologues and multiple points of view further isolate and fragment how readers experience and perceive characters in modernist literature (in Weinstein, 2006 p. 105).

## **4. Discussion**

### **The Comprehending of *The Sound and The Fury***

The novel is about the three Compson brothers’ obsessions with their sister Caddy, but this brief synopsis represents merely the surface of what the novel contains. A story told in four chapters, by four different narrators and out of chronological order, *The Sound and the Fury* requires intense concentration and patience to interpret and to understand.

#### **4.1. The First Narrator: Benjy**

The order of narratives is started on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1928. It is Benjy’s section. The uniqueness of this part, readers are invited by Faulkner to place ourselves within the angle of vision of Benjy. His eyes become readers’ eyes and his sense is readers’ and his experience is also readers.

Benjy, the narrator of the difficult first section of the novel, has no concept of time. He portrays all events in the present, April Seventh, 1928, regardless of when they actually occurred in his life. The events that actually take place on April Seventh are rather insignificant. Far more important are the memories evoked by Benjy’s experiences on that day. The summary below therefore includes not only the

events that take place on April the Seventh, but the past events that these cues from the present cause Benjy to recall.

Benjy, whose eyes are our only window on the Compsons thus far, is one of the most incomprehensible and challenging narrators in all of literature. Benjy's severe mental disability has left him with virtually no capacity for subjective thought. From his perspective, life is merely a string of images, sounds, and memories that he is unable to interpret, express, or organize in any meaningful way. Benjy does not understand any of the abstract concepts of human existence, such as birth, death, love, family, virginity, intimacy, and marriage. The greatest barrier to Benjy's ability to narrate is the fact that he has no concept of time. Benjy lives in an endless present tense. He interprets all events and memories as taking place in the present, April Seventh, 1928, regardless of when they actually occur in his life.

Visual and auditory cues from the present cause Benjy to remember events from the past, but he does not understand that these remembrances are memories. He regards them just as if they were experiences from the present. Edel states that certain things happen which have happened before, they melt together. Each memory, recalls another and enfolds it (1965, p. 164). When Benjy snagged nail with Luster, his memory jumped ahead when he and Caddy in Christmas.

Readers read Benjy's section, in terms of his perception as they come to him. He smells things and people (visual objects) as if they were odour. He smells her sister, Caddy, "Like tress" or Versh smells "like rain". Readers are dealing with 3 years old boy whom the world is safe and neat. His world is of stimulus and response.

For Benjy, however, time is a constant, not a flow, and is almost meaningless. The struggle we endure in reading Benjy's narrative forces us to confront what life would be like without the solidifying presence of time. Benjy offers us a few shattered pieces of truth, but they are difficult to discern. Indeed, reading the chapter can be very disorienting. Benjy's flashbacks occur frequently and without warning, sometimes even middle of sentence. Faulkner sometimes marks these leaps in time with italicized text, but not always.

The easiest way to tell when we are in the present is if we sense the presence of Luster: he plays a role only in the scenes from 1928. Compounding the temporal confusion of this section is the fact that several characters have the same names. Benjy's brother Quentin can easily be confused with Miss Quentin, Caddy's illegitimate daughter. Likewise, Benjy's brother Jason can be confused with the boys' father, Mr. Compson who is also named Jason. Finally, we learn only implicitly that Benjy and Maury are the same person, as the Compsons renamed Benjy when they discovered his mental disability in 1900.

The presence of Mrs. Compson's brother, Uncle Maury, confuses events in the novel even further. One of Faulkner's primary reasons for using Benjy as the narrator of this first section is to hint at the tragic events and circumstances of the Compson family history through a completely objective voice that offers no commentary. Benjy's objectivity is based on his powerful, innate sense of order and chaos. He interprets the world by comparing his perceptions and experiences to the pattern of order and familiarity that exists in his mind. Benjy immediately notices if something (especially something involving Caddy) seems wrong or out of place. Any

such deviation from Benjy's pattern of familiarity creates chaos in his mind and upsets him, making him cry or moan.

Benjy's first whiff of Caddy's perfume, for instance, shocks his sense of order, he detects something awry and it disturbs him greatly. Benjy's almost inhuman objectivity contrasts sharply with the perspectives of Quentin and Jason, who, as readers will see in the next two sections, are both so skewed by their obsessions with Caddy that neither can narrate without significant embellishment or prejudice. Benjy's objectivity, on the other hand, allows readers to gather clues on their own. His narrative gradually gives us an understanding of the relationships that govern the Compson household.

Mr. Compson is a distant figure, lost in his own cynicism and alcoholism. Likewise, Mrs. Compson is clearly ineffectual as a mother to her children, and her understanding of Benjy's needs is astonishingly feeble. She is constantly absorbed in self-pity and is neurotically insecure about her Bascomb family name. For whatever reason, Mrs. Compson favors Jason, the most wicked of her children. The only true role model and parent to the Compson children is Dilsey, who is the only real source of stability in the household. Though illiterate, Dilsey is faithful, devoted, and competent. She treats the children firmly but kindly, with clear concern for their welfare and character.

The Compson children's vastly differing personalities are apparent from a very young age. Caddy acts as a mother figure to Benjy and is his only real source of affection. However, Caddy seems stubborn, as readers see when she insists that the other children "mind" her instead of minding Dilsey. Additionally, Caddy's muddying of her underwear in the stream as a young child foreshadows her later promiscuity. Caddy literally dirties herself, and the fact that Dilsey is unable to wipe the mud off suggests that Caddy's indiscretions will taint the family name.

The mud on Caddy's underwear prefigures her later promiscuity. We see that Caddy begins experimenting with boys at a young age, wearing perfume and having amorous encounters on the swing near the stream. Benjy senses that something is out of place, which disrupts the familiar patterns in his mind. He can sense Caddy's promiscuity, which in his mind is linked to the smell of her perfume. Indeed, Benjy becomes upset and cries every time he smells Caddy's perfume. The first time he smells the perfume, in 1905, Caddy washes it off. Still a virgin at this point, she is literally able to wash away the evidence of her indiscretions.

However, when Caddy comes home from a date in 1909, Benjy cries loudly when he sees her. Caddy knows that she cannot simply wash away her sin as she could before. Aware that Benjy is upset, Caddy avoids him. This evasion makes Benjy cry even louder.

The moment the three Compson boys look up into the tree and see Caddy's muddy underwear represents one of the climactic moments in the novel's theme of moral decay. Whether or not they know it at the time, all three boys are made aware of the curse on the Compson name at this moment. The promiscuity heralded by Caddy's dirty pants eventually unravels each brother's emotional or mental stability. Quentin commits suicide due to his despair over Caddy's lost purity. Jason lives a life of resentment and hatred after Caddy's promiscuity ruins his chances of getting the job that Caddy's husband had promised him. Caddy's banishment from the

Compson household destroys the order in Benjy's world, leaving him confused, haunted, and longing futilely for her return.

#### **4.2. The Second Narrator: Quentin**

The second narrator is Quentin, on second of June 1910. This section of the narrative relates Quentin's tormented and jumbled inner thoughts on the day that he commits suicide. Faulkner uses Quentin's narrative to continue his exploration of the human experience of time.

Though not quite as disorienting as Benjy's narrative, Quentin's is nonetheless very abstract. Benjy is able to offer only vague impressions and objective observation. Quentin, however, has a conscious, subjective voice and frequently tends toward abstract thought. Quentin's narrative puts readers into questions of human motivation, cause and effect, and circumstance that Benjy is unable to identify or consider.

Like Benjy, Quentin has memories of the past that intrude on his narrative constantly and without warning. Quentin's memory is complicated because it is largely intertwined with his fantasies. Sometimes it is difficult to tell which of his memories are based on events that actually occurred and which are based on fantasy or wishful thinking. Quentin's mind is far more complex than Benjy's, and, unlike Benjy, he is aware that his flashbacks are just memories.

Faulkner emphasizes the importance of time and memory in Quentin's world through the frequent appearance of clocks and watches. Quentin is effectively trapped in time, obsessed with his past and memories. He always notices the bells of the Harvard clock tower. The ticking of his watch haunts him even after he breaks the watch against his dresser. Quentin asks the owner of the clock shop whether any of the clocks is correct, but does not want to know what time it is. Quentin is trapped by time, unable and unwilling to move beyond his memories of the past. He attempts to escape time's grasp by breaking his watch, but its ticking continues to haunt him afterward, and he sees no solution but suicide. Time and watch is used by Faulkner as a symbol to subjective entity owned by human.

Additionally, Quentin repeatedly mentions walking into and out of shadows, which are constant reminders of time as gauged by the position of the sun throughout the course of a day. Unlike Benjy, who is oblivious to time, Quentin is so obsessed and haunted by it that he sees suicide as his only escape.

Clearly, the main thrust of Quentin's section is his struggle with Caddy's promiscuity. Quentin is horrified by Caddy's conduct, and he is obsessed by the stain it has left on the family's honor. Quentin, like Benjy, has a strong sense of order and chaos. However, while Benjy's order is based on patterns of experience in his mind, Quentin's order is based on a traditional, idealized Southern code of honor and conduct. This code is a legacy of the old South, a highly paternalistic society in which men were expected to act as gentlemen and women as ladies. Quentin believes very strongly in the ideals espoused under this traditional code: family honor; gentlemanly, virtue, strength, and decency; and especially feminine purity, modesty, and virginity.

Caddy's promiscuity deeply hurts Quentin because he views it as dirty and shameful, a blatant violation of the ideal of femininity found in his Southern code. Quentin takes his code very seriously, as it forms the basis of order in his world. When Caddy's promiscuity breaks the code, Quentin attempts to maintain his sense

of order by responding in a manner he considers honorable. Thinking that suicide is the only way to salvage the family name, Quentin tells Caddy that he will kill himself if she does the same. When she is uninterested, Quentin's next idea is to falsely accept the responsibility for fathering Caddy's child a lie, but one he considers honorable and gentlemanly.

When Quentin sees that no one else in his family shares his code and his convictions, he reverts to suicide as the only remaining option, a means of exit while preserving his ordered universe. Quentin's struggle to reconcile Caddy's actions with his own traditional Southern value system reflects Faulkner's broader concern with the clash between the old South and the modern world. Like a medieval code of chivalry, the old South's ideals are based on a society that has largely disappeared.

Men and women like Quentin, who attempt to cling to these increasingly outdated Southern ideals, sense that their grasp is slipping and their sense of order disappearing. Their reliance on a set of outdated myths and ideals leaves them unequipped to deal with the realities of the modern world. Several characters in *The Sound and the Fury* embody this changing of the guard from old ideals to modern realities. Damuddy, the lone representative of the old South left in the Compson family, dies before any of the other action in the novel takes place. Miss Quentin, the lone member of the Compsons' new generation, is not only a bastard child, but has continued in Caddy's promiscuous ways without displaying any of the guilt Caddy feels about doing something wrong.

Quentin's obsession with his moral code is just one indication of his overall tendency toward thought rather than action. Quentin is clearly very bright, but his fixation on abstractions paralyzes him. He spends all his time thinking about nebulous concepts; time, honor, virginity, etc that have no physical presence.

Existing only as words, these abstractions are difficult to act upon tangibly. Indeed, readers see that Quentin is largely incapable of effective action: he frequently comes up with ideas, but never carries them out successfully.

Quentin devises the double suicide pact with Caddy as a means of escape, but Caddy rejects the idea and escapes the Compson family without him.

#### **4.3. The Third Narrator: Jason Compson**

The third narrator is Jason Compson IV. It is Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1928. It is the date before Benjy's section. His world is a world of fury. His life is driven by consuming rage.

Faulkner sets the tone of Jason's section from the first sentence: "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say." Jason has grown into a petty, sadistic, and bitter man, and we see that the form of his narrative reflects this hardened mind. Jason's narrative is clear, precise, swift, and almost completely emotionless. His clarity helps reveal several key plot details that the two previous sections have merely implied. Jason confirms that Benjy has been castrated, that Quentin drowned himself, and that Caddy was divorced. However, though a relief after the chaotic stream of consciousness of Benjy's and Quentin's narratives, Jason's section is ultimately disturbing in its clear depiction of the hatred and cruelty with which Jason runs the Compson family.

Though cunning and clever, Jason does not put his talents to good use. Instead, he succumbs to his own hatred and wallows in a sense of victimization. He

resents Caddy for costing him the job at Herbert's bank, but fails to appreciate the fact that without Caddy he would never have been offered the job in the first place. The simple wickedness Jason displayed as child has intensified in his adulthood. He takes pleasure in tormenting everyone around him and takes strength from a conviction that, because he has been wronged, he is always right.

Considering that Jason is the new head of the Compson household, the family truly has sunk deeper. Whereas his grandfather was a Civil War general and his great-grandfather the governor of Mississippi,

Jason works as a clerk in a farm-supply store and steals from his own family. He is hardly of the same material as the ancestors who built up the family name. Ironically, however, Jason is the only one of the Compson children to win Mrs. Compson's love. Jason abuses his mother's trust, using it to blind her to the fact that he is stealing large sums of money from her. It is unclear why Mrs. Compson favors Jason so much, but perhaps it is because he shares Mrs. Compson's tendencies toward misery and self-pity much more than the other children.

Jason is not bothered by failing to live up to his ancestors' greatness because he is completely unconcerned with the past. Unlike Benjy and Quentin, Jason is wholly focused on the present and on manipulating the present for future personal gain. He does recall past events, but only concentrates on the effect those events have on him here and now. Jason dwells on Caddy's divorce, for example, only because it has left him in a menial and unfulfilling job. However, despite Jason's constant attempts to twist present circumstances to his own benefit, he does not really have any aspirations. He maintains overwhelming greed, selfishness, and focus on future gain, but does not use these to work toward any higher goal. Jason is all motivation with virtually no ambition.

#### **4.4. The Fourth Narrator: Dilsey**

The fourth narrator is Dilsey, in Easter Sunday, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1928. *The Sound and the Fury* ends with the symbolic completion of the Compsons' downfall, but also hints at the possibility of resurrection or renewal. Importantly, this last chapter takes place on Easter Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection and thus a powerful symbol of redemption and hope. Dilsey says: "I seed the beginning en now I sees the endin".

Readers may expect Caddy to narrate the last section, since she is in many ways the most important character in the novel, and the only one of the Compson children who has not had a chance to speak. However, Faulkner narrates this section himself, from a third-person perspective. This viewpoint takes us a step back from the Compsons' inner world and provides a more panoramic view of the tragedy that has unfolded. The narrative voice Faulkner adopts is an objective one, similar to Benjy's in its ability to view the Compson world without resentment, but unlike Benjy's in that it is omniscient and relies on a more traditional mode of storytelling.

When Miss Quentin flees, the Compson name is definitively ruined. Caddy has been banished and neither of the remaining brothers is emotionally or mentally capable of passing the Compson name on to an heir. The storied, near-mythic past of the Compson family has disintegrated, with nothing remaining but a bitter, wifeless, and now penniless farm-supply clerk. The Compsons are finished. Miss Quentin's

successful escape emphasizes the impotence and failure of the Compson men, especially in relation to the Compson women. Mr. Compson sets this precedent, constantly bowing to his wife's complaining and allowing her to pervert the family with her self-pitying and dependent nature.

Likewise, we have seen that Benjy, Quentin, and Jason have all been dominated by Caddy in one way or another: Benjy cannot function without the sense of order Caddy provides him, Quentin cannot carry on with the knowledge of Caddy's promiscuity, and Jason cannot get past the fact that Caddy's out-of-wedlock pregnancy cost him a job. However, Caddy has never actively attempted to dominate her brothers. Each brother's impotence comes from an internal weakness or a form of self-absorption: Benjy's internal sense of order that relies entirely on Caddy, Quentin's neurotic ideal of feminine purity, and Jason's relentless self-pity. Caddy herself has never really done anything to harm her brothers directly.

Despite the Compsons' weakness and downfall, one source of hope and stability remains to hold the family together, Dilsey's simple, strong, protective presence. Dilsey adheres to the same traditional Southern values of religion and family upon which the original Compsons built their name. However, unlike the Compsons, Dilsey does not allow these values to be corrupted by self-absorption. Unlike the rest of the family, she is not ashamed to bring Benjy to church with her. She loves Benjy as only Caddy has, and believes that God loves Benjy regardless of his lack of intelligence. Dilsey is not obsessed with the passage of time as Quentin is, and she is not overcome by the chaos of experience as the other Compsons are. Rather, she endures happiness and sadness with the same incorruptible will to carry on and sense of duty to protect those she loves. She looks on the Compson tragedy with sadness, but does not let it contaminate her own spirit. In her words, "I seed de beginning, en now I sees de ending."

Dilsey's words imply that the Compsons' downfall is part of a larger cycle. Indeed, Dilsey has, in effect, resurrected the original values of the Compsons' ancestors. The Compsons become carried away with the greatness of their own name, neglecting the strength of family in favor of self-absorption. Dilsey, on the other hand, is the opposite of self-absorption. She maintains a strong spirit and a profound respect for an unpretentious, unadorned, yet powerful code of values. Dilsey is the redeemer of the Compson legacy, and provides an almost graceful landing after the resounding fall of the once-great household. In some respects, Dilsey's new role represents a reversal of the traditional Southern order: a black servant, once considered the lowest position in Southern society, is now the only torchbearer for the name of a prestigious white family.

## **5. Conclusion**

The novel closes where it started, with Benjy. For a brief moment, we return to the world of order and chaos that exists in Benjy's mind. Benjy is almost unable to bear it when the carriage turns in an unexpected direction, as this deviation shatters his familiar, ordered routine.

When Luster steers back onto the familiar route, Benjy becomes peaceful. Order prevails, and the elements of Benjy's experience return to the places where he expects to find them. Faulkner implies a hope that the Compson name itself, under Dilsey's guardianship, will likewise be set in order.

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