

“Narratology and Narrative technique in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*”

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Narratology is not the reading and interpretation of individual stories, but the attempt to study the nature of ‘story’ itself, as a concept and a cultural practice. The question of who is telling the story has been baffling almost all since the inception of fictional world. The narrator, of course, is the fabricated presence telling the story. The two most common points of view of the narrating presence are first-person and third-person. The first-person narrator is a narrator who is telling the story him or herself without access to any consciousness aside from his or her own. The third-person point of view can be divided into two main groups: limited and unlimited or ‘omniscient’. This paper is an attempt to find out the narrator and, of course, the narrative techniques used by Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Attempting to apply traditional plot summary to *The Sound and the Fury* is difficult. In his acceptance speech, Faulkner stated that his basic theme was the human heart in conflict with itself, and his exploration of this theme resulted in a variety of highly original, often difficult literary techniques expressing the full spectrum of human experience. At a basic level, 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 voices, and out of chronological order, *The Sound and the Fury* requires intense concentration and patience to interpret and understand.

The first three chapters of the novel consist of the convoluted thoughts, voices, and memories of the three Compson brothers, captured on three different days. The brothers are

Benjy, a severely retarded thirty-three-year-old man, speaking in April, 1928; Quentin, a young Harvard student, speaking in June, 1910; and Jason, a bitter farm-supply store worker, speaking again in April, 1928. Faulkner tells the fourth chapter in his own narrative voice, but focuses on Dilsey, the Compson family's devoted "Negro" cook who has played a great part in raising the children. Faulkner harnesses the brothers' memories of their sister Caddy, using a single symbolic moment to forecast the decline of the once prominent Compson family and to examine the deterioration of the Southern aristocratic class since the Civil War.

In this novel, there is a very distinct story and plot at the superficial level. As one delves deeper into the plot, it is much fabricated. In one of his lectures at a University, Faulkner said:

The Sound and the Fury began with the picture of the little girl's muddy drawers, climbing the tree to look in the parlor window with her brothers that didn't have the courage to climb the tree waiting to see what she saw. And I tried first to tell it with one brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section One. I tried with another brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section Two. I tried the third brother, because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes, I thought. And that failed, and I tried myself—the fourth section—to tell what happened, and I still failed. (Faulkner in the University 1)

It seems that everything this novel expresses may be encapsulated in the above-cited remarks. The story of the novel has interior monologue, third-person and first-person narrative point of views. The distinction between interior monologues in third-person texts and first-person texts lies not in the proximity to the consciousness of the mind observed but in the nature of the mind observing. As Dorrit Cohn points out: "the direct expression of a character's thought [in third-person narration] will always be a quotation," in her terminology, a "quoted monologue." (Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 15)

First-person interior monologue, however, implies retrospection (Cohn 14), a re-creation of earlier memory, implying both a narrative distance from that earlier self and the possibility for a dynamic rearranging of memories. These two axes of chronology and narration yield a temporal range from sequential to associative, and a narrative range of a maximum distance between the

narrating self and the experiencing self, and a zero limit where the narrating self is subsumed in the experiencing self, so that the reader finds himself established in the thought of the principal personage, and the uninterrupted unrolling of that thought, replacing the previous form of narrative, conveys to us what the personage is doing and what is happening to him" (qtd. in Cohn 173, 183).

By using an autonomous monologue for his characters, bracketed from the moment of narration, Faulkner is free to focus attention on the achronology of events in the narrator's mind, making these associations the "setting" for the story. This association of thoughts leaves the monologues void of self-analysis or cause and effect relationships, shifting the focus away from the present moment back to the past. When Benjy snags his coat on the fence walking with Luster, he remembers a time when he caught his clothes on the fence walking with Caddy while delivering Uncle Maury's love notes (*Sound and Fury*, 2).

The four sections of *The Sound and the Fury*, each deal with one day in the lives of the Compson family, are presented from four different points of view. The first three sections are each narrated by a different character involved in the situation whereas the fourth is related by an external third-person narrator. To find out in what respect they differ one has to take a closer look at each of the sections separately in order to analyze the interdependence of differences in narrative perspective.

In the first section, April Seventh, 1928[The Benjy Section], the narrative perspective is that of a mentally retarded person with the consciousness of a very young child. Due to the limitations implied because of this handicap, the perspective through which the situation is presented is necessarily restricted. This affects the choice of the events related as well as the language. Benjy's only means of expressing himself are either being still and serene or moaning and crying. The author uses a stream-of-consciousness technique to convey his mental processes as he cannot communicate by means of language. As is said in the text Benjy is: "trying to say" (*Sound and Fury*, 49, 50-51); "He can't tell what you saying." Luster said. "He deaf and dumb" (*Sound and Fury*, 49)

The stream-of-consciousness technique mostly has material; chaotic, spontaneous mental experiences of human consciousness. (Kaluza, Irena. *The Functioning of Sentence Structure in the Stream-of-Consciousness Technique*,10) In Benjy's section this is true because of his incapacity to differentiate between the present and the past. For him his memories are as real as present

occurrences. Therefore his whole section is written in one and the same tense. Things he perceives evoke associative memories from various time levels in the past. These at face value unconnected episodes are elements of an impressionistic picture, which the reader has to sort out, almost without any help. The only clues Faulkner offers is a change in type face to indicate time changes and the change of Benjy's attendants to mark different periods of his life. Most of his memories are connected by a central character, Caddy. His associations are triggered by sensory perceptions, mainly the senses of smelling (*Sound and Fury*, 4) and touching e.g. when he was "being caught on a nail" (*Sound and Fury*, 2) are prevalent. The other two senses, i.e. hearing and seeing, are made use of as "recording devices" because Benjy is incapable of establishing logical relationships, for example between cause and effect. His inability to interpret or even understand what is going on results in his rendering events just as a camera or phonograph would record it. Striking examples of his peculiar sense of vision are: "The barn wasn't there and we had to wait until it came back. I didn't see it come back. It came behind us" (*Sound and Fury*, 19)

The fact that Benjy mechanically reports important and unimportant events, statements, questions etc. alike, is further stressed by Faulkner's unconventional use of punctuation, leaving out question- and exclamation marks. To mark the end of a sentence only full stops are used, these even substitute commas most of the time.

The second section, June Second, 1910 [The Quentin Section], is written from Quentin's point of view. He is Benjy's older brother who is studying at Harvard. The difference between the two brothers concerning their mental capacity is that Quentin's mind is much more complex and intelligent. His hypersensitivity leads to emotional instability, despair and ultimately to his suicide. Thus Quentin's consciousness is multi-leveled. In his section not only actions, sensory perceptions and memories are presented, but also Quentin's reflections about questions of human existence. Like Benjy, he jumps from one time level to another; his interior monologue consists of a chain of thoughts, each generating another often without any obvious connection. Note, for example, the following:

I have committed incest I said father it was I it was not Dalton Ames And
when he put Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. When he put the pistol in
my hand I didn't. That's why I didn't. (*Sound and Fury*, 77)

In this section the influence of Sigmund Freud's psycho-analytic theories manifests itself most clearly. For example Quentin's obsession with Caddy's and her mother's failures as regards

the roles he assigns to women. His preoccupation with motherhood is illustrated for example by his imagining himself as Dalton Ames' mother (*Sound and Fury*, 78). His repetition of the remark: "If I had just had a mother so I could say mother mother." (*Sound and Fury*, 93) blames his mother's shortcomings for the problems in the Compson family. Thus some knowledge of Freud's theories enables the reader to recognize the lines along which his consciousness operates. This is illustrated by the following example:

I want my boys to be more than friends yes Candace and Quentin more than
friends Father I have committed what a pity you had no brother or sister No sister
no sister had no sister [...] and you have taken my little daughter away from me
My little sister had no. If I could say Mother. Mother. (*Sound and Fury*, 93)

The fact that this section is written from the point of view of an intelligent human being heavily affected by emotional turmoil has a deep impact on the use of linguistic and literary devices. First of all Quentin's superior educational standard is reflected in the level of language used in his section. As his thoughts center around abstract ideas the vocabulary employed is necessarily less concrete and more varied, and on the whole more sophisticated than in the Benjy section. The structure of Quentin's sentences depends on his momentary state of mind: the more fragmented the language, the more uncontrolled and incoherent his thinking.

Almost one third of Quentin's section displays these unorthodox techniques, for example changes in typefaces, no punctuation or lack of capitalization. These means are often combined with each other; some such passages are extended over up to three pages. (*Sound and Fury*, 106-110) The absence of punctuation underlines the uninterrupted flow of thoughts, so to speak the "stream-of-consciousness". Thus one memory blends with other memories in free association leading away from the central theme. To convey Quentin's central memory without too many deviations Faulkner simplifies his thought process by letting him be unconscious (*Sound and Fury*, 148-162) in one part of the second section. These fourteen pages are completely without punctuation or typographical variations. Instead of full stops he uses paragraphs to structure the sequence, however without capitalization.

After Quentin arrives back in his room at Harvard and cleans his clothing with gasoline from Shreve's apartment, he washes and dresses in a fresh shirt and suit and stands, brushing his hair, when he hears the chimes for the half-hour. He thinks, "But there was until the three

quarters anyway. Except suppose" (197). The last word in this phrase is followed by a blank in the text, and then the print shifts to italics:

*seeing on the rushing darkness only his own face no broken feather unless
two of them but not two like that going to Boston the same night then my face his
face for an instant across the crashing when out of darkness two lighted windows
in rigid fleeing crash gone his face and mine just I see saw did I see not goodbye the
empty marquee empty of eating the road empty in darkness in silence the bridge
arching into silence darkness sleep the water peaceful and swift not
goodbye (197- 8).*

This is followed by a new paragraph that is not a continuation of the narrative interrupted by the matter in italics. This new paragraph, rather, continues to recount Quentin's activities as he prepares himself in his rooms before committing suicide, but in beginning "I turned out the light and went into my bedroom,..." it does not finish the unfinished "except suppose" that preceded the above italicized passage. In fact, nothing in the rest of the novel suggests a continuation of that broken off thought. It is here Faulkner has rendered the moment of Quentin's plunge into the river. In fact, we may read his "Except suppose" to be a momentary lucidity in his realization that while he perceives himself to be preparing to kill himself, he has actually already jumped into the river and is remembering preparing. That is, when he hears the chimes for the half hour and thinks "But there was until the three quarters anyway, except suppose" his thought breaks off at just the moment he realizes that he has already jumped.

The third section, April Sixth, 1928[The Jason Section], of the book is written from the perspective of Jason, the third Compson brother. It is easier to read as it is more orthodox as neither form nor content pose unusual difficulties for the reader. The narrative passages are rendered in a conventional first person narrative written in past tense, whereas most of the section consists of quoted direct speech, introduced by "I says" or "I says to myself". The fact that his mind never operates beyond this speech level proves him to be an one-dimensional character. Jason insists on facts and shuts out all emotions to protect himself against all irrational. This causes him to view Caddy, his family and his environment in a distorted way and disables him to understand other people (*Sound and Fury*, 263). Therefore he does not care about what they do as long as appearances are kept up (*Sound and Fury*, 261). This pseudo-objective view of the world isolates Jason totally, just as the obsession with the past isolates Quentin. He is proud of his self-

sufficiency: "[...] like I say I guess I don't need any man's help to get along I can stand on my own feet like I always have." (*Sound and Fury*, 206)

On the one hand Jason's section contains a number of hypo tactical structures reflecting his efforts to appear logical. They are mainly introduced by linkers like: if, so, but, (*Sound and Fury*, 232) etc.. On the other hand his grammar is flawed and his language contains sub-standard forms in imitation of common speech. (*Sound and Fury*, 202) The use of short sentences in the dialogue parts (pp. 54-56) suggests that Jason is always restless, always preparing for a better future that he will never reach (*Sound and Fury*, 245-246) because of his shortcomings, which lie mainly in his believing to be clever. In reality he is incompetent in practical affairs, as he relies on prejudices and personal ideas to demonstrate his independence. Therefore the third perspective we are given, is that of a man who at first glance, though odious, appears rational and sensible but underneath the surface struggles with the same madness as Benjy and Quentin do.

At first glance the last section, April Eighth, 1928[The Last Section], appears to be a conventional narration from the perspective of an objective third person narrator. This external point of view is that of an outside spectator who is mostly restricted to relating what he observes. In some instances, however, he explains the characters' actions on the basis of his personal interpretation. It is his intimate knowledge of the family that enables him to reach his conclusions and not his omniscience. The narrator is allowed an insight into one character's mind, namely Jason's, only in few passages (*Sound and Fury*, 306 - 309). Thus he is not an omniscient narrator since his inside view is limited to only one character, and he does not even know what will happen to Jason nor what he will do or why.⁴⁰ Though the insight in Jason's consciousness becomes deeper in the course of the fourth section⁴¹ the distance between him and the narrator is kept up. This ambiguous mixture of insight and detachment is clearly demonstrated by the following quote: "[...]he thought of the people soon to be going quietly home to Sunday dinner, decorously festive, and of himself trying to hold the fatal, furious little old man whom he dared not release long enough to turn his back and run." (*Sound and Fury*, 310) "[...] And then a furious desire not to die seized him and he struggled [...]" (*Sound and Fury*, 311)The distance is underlined by recurring third person phrases like:"He imagined himself [...]" (*Sound and Fury*, 307);"He thought that." (*Sound and Fury*, 314); He could see the opposed forces of his destiny" (*Sound and Fury*, 307).

Thus the narrator in this section is relatively detached but not without bias. His perspective is that of a spectator who tends to interpret characters and their actions, but is limited in as far as

he has real access into one mind only, in that he does not know anything about the future nor that he can control what happens. He is also restricted concerning time.

The novel doses 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. Faulkner is successful in pouring out the insanity of Benjy through sanity of narration and the narrative technique which he has used fully resolve the conflict and conveys the idea that there is no one, true reality, but that reality is dependent on the person who perceives it, i.e. reality is always subjective and never objective. This is one of the typical features of modernist literature that it breaks down old rules of stability, unchangeable truth and the clear distinction between good and bad, sane and insane and ultimately between right and wrong, true or false.

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