

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Sound and the Fury

by

William Faulkner

Book Information

William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury
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This stream-of-consciousness tale of the Compson family of Jefferson is also the tale of the South.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Family Life, Misc./Other; People, African American; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

"Caddy's" Quentin the sister's illegitimate daughter, named for her uncle after his suicide, whose running away completes the family's failure

Benjamin Compson the mentally retarded brother whose narrative comprises the novel's opening section

Caddy Compson the lone sister among her siblings, who is more compassionate than her brothers, but just as selfish in her own way

Caroline Compson the children's manipulative, hypochondriacal mother, whose defining trait may be her defense of her Bascomb maiden name

Dilsey the Compson's house servant, whose presence among them spans the entire generational history the novel encompasses

Jason Compson the mean and conniving brother who becomes his mother's caretaker after she loses Caddy and Quentin

Mr. Compson also named Jason; a learned, but deeply cynical man, who is viewed most completely through Quentin's recollections of his bitter sayings

Quentin Compson the sensitive brother who fails to find a way to save his sister, Caddy, from disgrace

Vocabulary

apotheosis deification, or the ultimate example of a certain quality or type

avatar the embodiment of a philosophical concept or a deity, usually in the form of a person

belling Faulkner's black dialect rendering of "bellowing," used frequently to describe Benjy

fecundity fruitfulness, related to vegetation, bearing children, or intellectual productivity

reducto absurdum (usually conveyed as "reductio" absurdum) a term from Latin rhetoric that refers to the refuting of a proposition by demonstrating its absurdity when taken to its logical conclusion

Synopsis

This saga of the doomed Compson family from the 1890s through 1928 is told in turns by three brothers: an idiot, an aborted poet, and a cruel conniver. After their "stream-of-consciousness" narratives, a final section presents the family's generational denouement in an objective, authorial voice.

Dated April seventh, 1928, the first section is presented in the voice and mind of Benjy, who was born retarded (and possibly autistic) and cannot speak. Benjy's primary cue to memory is smell, and his focus is constantly fragmented by whatever stimuli occurs, so that Benjy may report events separated by many years without any transitional markers.

June second, 1910 is the date of the subsequent section, set in Massachusetts, where Benjy's brother, Quentin, has gone to college. Quentin's narration is also a jumble of memory and the day's events, but Quentin obsessively wanders the same past searching for meaning. The sound of his grandfather's watch in his pocket (handless, but still ticking) symbolizes Quentin's search.

The third brother, Jason, provides the most logically connected brother narrative. Throughout his activities on April sixth, 1928, it is the view of human nature that Jason fragments on the jagged edges of his self-pitying, essentially futile rage. His schemes

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for the restitution of his self-respect and promises of success reveal a verbally agile, but morally contorted mode of thought as deranged in its own way as his two brothers'.

On the date of the final section, April eighth, 1928, the narration obtains a plateau in the present, which it crosses with a more logical tread.

The saga that emerges from these discrete voices centers on the brothers' relationship to their sister, Caddy. Their mother, Miss Caroline, has used hypochondria as a buffer against reality and an excuse to withhold love since early in their childhood. In the void left by her bedroom absences, Caddy takes charge, caring for Benjy, confiding with Quentin, and trying to govern Jason's meanness. Formerly a family of substance in the rural environs of Jefferson, Mississippi, the Compsons' fortunes progressively diminish. The children's minister father safeguards their childhood freedoms, but grows so cynical that his fatalistic view of the world becomes a lethal partner to Miss Caroline's cold invalidism.

As Caddy reaches adolescence, she embarks on a precocious spree of promiscuity. Pregnant, she poses the ultimate revelation of the family's fall from grace. Miss Caroline arranges a desperate marriage to salvage respectability, but Jason's self-defeating revelation of Caddy's promiscuity leads to a swift, ignominious divorce. Caddy is disowned in a compounding act of hopeless denial.

Benjy cannot bear nor understand the loss of Caddy; his life becomes a futile vigil for her return. Quentin cannot reconcile the reality of Caddy's behavior with his poetic desires for a state of grace; he commits suicide in Boston. Jason, left to support the remainder of the Compson household, which includes Caddy's illegitimate daughter while banishing Caddy herself, deeply resents the burdens of his own position; seemingly in control, he fails completely to restore the family's prosperity or even simple decency. Caddy's daughter, named Quentin after her dead uncle, follows in her mother's footsteps and runs away in a heat of scandal.

Amid the degenerative selfishness of the Compson clan, their house servant, Dilsey, endures. She alone accepts others as they are and views events with an eternal, not fragmented, vision of time. She presides over the novel's culminating section, providing whatever strength and comfort the household contains.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Benjy become so upset as Luster drives their carriage into the cemetery at the end of the novel?

Luster carelessly directs the horse around the left side of a monument at the cemetery's entrance. Benjy is accustomed to entering on the statue's right side. As Jason's serendipitous intervention confirms, Benjy's sense of order is so narrow and fragile that even this seemingly trivial deviation upsets his world. He is not the only Compson with a skewed and fragile sense of order.

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Literary Analysis

Briefly analyze how Faulkner depicts the relationship between blacks and whites through the prism of Dilsey's relationship with Miss Caroline.

The glue of denial does a powerful job of binding their lives together. The white mistress, supposedly the dominant figure, is actually helpless to such an extent that her black servant treats her like a chronically ill child. A surprising amount of candor passes between them, and Dilsey is more in charge than she is subservient. On the other hand, Miss Caroline can still claim that only she, not Dilsey, has suffered her children's misfortunes, despite Dilsey's clear compassion and sacrifices for the family. While bigotry precludes an admission of equality between the two women, both would probably concede to their interdependence. Within that sharing of roles, it is the servant who loves and administers, while the mistress weakly submits and perverts the society of the hearth.

Inferential Comprehension

Which character's role in the Compson family might most justly be blamed for the tragedy that befalls them all?

While each family member contributes his or her own disability and sins to the Compsons' demise, Miss Caroline's influence was the most crucial. Her feigned helplessness and withholding of love, as she retreats in sickness to her room when any adversity arrives, creates a void in her children's lives from which they all fail to emerge. She seals that void shut when she enforces the one direct decision she makes in the novel: banishing Caddy from the family, contending that Caddy's illegitimate daughter must be absolutely spared knowledge of her mother's sins. That the decision denies Quentin a mother's love weighs little in the balance Miss Caroline upholds for "appearances."

Constructing Meaning

Unlike the first three sections of the novel, the section called "April Eighth, 1928" was written in an objective voice. Why might the author have chosen this way of ending the novel?

Like the other sections, the final one is dominated by a specific character's frame of reference. As the Compsons' black domestic, Dilsey has been present and very directly involved in the family's history. However, she has had no voice in the decisions that brought about their downfall. Were Faulkner to place the fourth section of the novel in Dilsey's "inner voice," he would have run a terrible risk of sentimentality. As her frame of reference truly is a Christian and eternal one, the objective voice lends it proper and complete dignity in a way that the use of dialect would have undercut.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft Faulkner took his title from the soliloquy in *MacBeth* where the doomed, illicit monarch calls life "...a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing." This depleted view of life answers directly the news that the Queen is dead, just as the symbolic "death" of Caddy is at the heart of the brothers' soliloquies. Many critics have noted Faulkner's almost literal adoption of the line as a structure for his novel. Ask your students to apply the line to the novel. Benjy is clearly the idiot, Quentin the sound, and Jason the fury, in the simplest application. But each brother may also be read as evincing all the elements of *MacBeth*'s formula. Are they equally innocent, equally guilty, equally deficient? To aid the students' inquiry, you may want to direct their attention to the moment in the fourth section when the objective narrator describes Benjy: "Then Ben wailed again, hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant by a conjunction of planets."

Comparing and Contrasting Particularly if your class is reading *The Sound and the Fury* in the context of the modern novel, a challenging task

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for students would be to compare and contrast Faulkner's handling of the "stream-of-consciousness" technique with other novelists' works. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Beckett's *Malone Dies* would be radical examples. Hemingway's Nick Adams stories from *In Our Time* and even Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* would offer simpler first-person narratives with more stream than consciousness, yet still provide ample grounds for contrasting Faulkner's fragmentary approach to memory with other representational strategies set within a single character's frame of mind.

Describing Actions or Events As a writing exercise, ask students to write direct, logical summaries of major plot elements in the Compson family history. With the data for any given year or event in the characters' past scattered across the pages of the novel, students are likely to derive strikingly different summaries. Did Quentin and Caddy, for example, ever consummate their incestuous (or at least Quentin's incestuous) notions? Having the students' own initial versions of the action pre-recorded may be a good way to jump start early discussions of the novel.

Identifying Reading Strategies One simple but effective path to the heart of the novel involves the range of names and nicknames used for Benjy. What the other characters call him at different points in the novel reveals volumes about their own character. Only Jason could possibly refer to him as "The Great American Gelding," for example, just as "Benjamin" is the only name one can imagine Miss Caroline using beyond the age at which she stripped Benjy's of her brother's name. Ask students to identify the range of names different characters use for Benjy, noting the circumstances or ages at which the names were applied. Next, ask students to analyze why the characters use their particular forms of address. (Even the objective narrator of the fourth section uses a distinctive form: Benjy is "Ben" when the narrator refers to him.) Have students explain the possible reasons behind this wide range of referents for Benjy's character.