

## Existential and Nostalgic Perspectives of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

**Surendra Kumar Sao**

Assistant Professor Department of English, Late Shri, Jaidev Satpathy Govt. College Basna District  
Mahasamund Chhattisgarh  
[saosurendra38@gmail.com](mailto:saosurendra38@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

William Faulkner, a renowned Southern author, is known for his portrayal of the decline of the privileged social class and the Southern United States after the Civil War. His narratives often depict decaying homes and the lives of distinguished individuals who maintain antiquated Southern beliefs. *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner is a profound and intricate novel that explores the intricacies of human existence. The novel follows the Compson family, who reside in Jefferson, Mississippi, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, through pivotal events such as Caddy's ascent, Benjy's alteration of name, Caddy's gestation and nuptials, Quentin's demise, Benjy's emasculation, and Mr. Compson's deterioration due to immoderate alcohol consumption. Faulkner employs innovative storytelling techniques such as stream of consciousness and a nonlinear plot structure, adding complexity to the work while also offering deep satisfaction to readers. The novel is notable for the profound complexity of its characters, each possessing intricate and diverse qualities that enhance the depth and complexity of the storyline.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner's novels depict the decline of the aristocratic class in the Southern region and the Deep South. Faulkner's works often feature decrepit homes and renowned individuals who maintain antiquated Southern notions and myths. *The Sound and the Fury* takes place in Jefferson, Mississippi, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a specific emphasis on Harvard University. The novel follows the Compson family, including Caddy, Quentin, Benjy, and Jason, through significant events. Faulkner's works are characterized by a stream-of-consciousness writing technique, which highlights the societal tension between traditional humanism and contemporary naturalism. In *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner uses the decline of the Compson family to explore the deterioration of Southern aristocracy and traditional values in the post-Civil War era, as the characters' struggles with time, morality, and identity reveal the futility of attempting to cling to a dying way of life. The thesis statement identifies the novel's central theme (the decline of the Southern aristocracy), The author specifies the literary device that explores this theme, which is the decline of the Compson family. The text highlights the key elements of the novel that support this theme, which include the characters' struggles with time, morality, and identity.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner uses a stream of consciousness narrative, alternating between present and past tense and using lengthy and complicated sentences. His innovative approach to literary modernism established him as one of the most highly regarded novelists of the 20th century. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949 for his

innovative achievements. *Many people widely recognize *The Sound and the Fury* as one of the most innovative and experimental American books of its era.* Thematic exploration in the novel delves into topics such as the relative nature of time, the erosion of innocence, and the inescapable nature of change, which have a profound impact on the reader's comprehension. Many often interpret the allegorical depiction of the aristocratic Compson family's demise as a metaphor for the decline of the South. Research has also examined how Faulkner's personal experiences and the socio-cultural setting of the period influenced the composition of the novel. Overall, *The Sound and the Fury* is a masterful work that delves into the intricacies of human existence, making it a ripe subject for scholarly investigation (Evelyn Scott, 1929).

Stream of Consciousness Literature focuses on the mental and spiritual aspects of existence, encompassing both the essence and manner in which these experiences occur. Robert Humphrey presents two distinct levels of awareness: the "speech level" and the "prespeech level," which lack any communication foundation. Stream-of-consciousness Fiction can be defined as a kind of literature that focuses primarily on delving into the preverbal levels of awareness to explore the inner psyche of the characters (Humphrey, R. 1954). Frankfurt R. Karl asserts that the stream of consciousness is the quintessence of modernism, closely associated with "high" modernism. This approach has attracted a wide range of people because it allows them to relate to different subjective viewpoints, or "consciousnesses." Over the course of 30 years, the family experiences financial difficulties, a loss of confidence in religion, and disillusionment with the city of Jefferson. Several members of the family meet tragic deaths, leaving them devoid of hope in their lives. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, specifically Act 5, Scene 5, where Macbeth delivers a renowned soliloquy on the absurdity of existence, serves as the inspiration for the story's title (Karl, 2010).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology involved closely reading the novel, focusing on *The Sound and the Fury* its narrative structure, time shifts, narrator shifts, unconventional punctuation and sentence structure, and the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Analyze Benjy, Quentin, Jason, Dilsey, and Caddy's characters, examining how Faulkner characterizes them and how they relate to the decline of the Compson family and the changing South. Identify and analyze the symbols and motifs in the novel, such as the Compson family's decline, the changing South, and the use of time. Investigate the novel's historical context, including the social and economic changes in the South during the early twentieth century. Examine Faulkner's use of literary devices such as narrative structure, voice/point of view, and symbolism to see how they contribute to the novel's meaning.

In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, important terms and concepts related to existentialism and nostalgia are explained. Faulkner employs an innovative narrative technique that reflects the inner thoughts and feelings of each character, creating a sense of immediacy and intimacy. This technique emphasizes individual subjectivity and the fragmented nature of human experience, aligning with existentialist principles. Individual freedom and responsibility: The characters' choices and actions (or inactions) exemplify the existentialist idea that individuals have complete freedom to shape their lives, but this freedom also carries immense responsibility. Quentin's suicide, Caddy's rebelliousness, and Jason's bitter resentment exemplify this concept. Absurdity and meaninglessness The novel explores the absurdity of human existence as characters struggle to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. This existentialist theme is exemplified by the Compson family's decline and the characters' futile attempts to cling to a dying way of life.

The Historical perspective of *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner published in 1929, *The Sound and the Fury* is considered Faulkner's first work of genius and one of the greatest contributions to American literature. The novel is set in the postbellum American South, during the period after Reconstruction (1865-77), a critical moment in American history when the South was redefining itself. The novel explores the decline of the Deep South after the Civil War, a theme common in Faulkner's works. The novel portrays the deterioration of the Southern aristocracy, exploring how families attempted to cling to old Southern values, codes, and myths that were corrupted and out of place in the reality of the modern world. Faulkner's writing style in the novel is considered highly experimental, using techniques such as stream of consciousness narrative, discarding chronological order, using multiple narrators and shifting between tenses. The novel is recognized as one of the most successfully innovative and experimental American novels of its time. Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954 for his literary contributions.

The other notable works by William Faulkner from a historical perspective *As I Lay Dying* (1930), This novel tells the story of the Bundren family's journey to bury their mother in her hometown. The novel explores themes of family, love, and the American South. *Light in August* (1932), This novel is set in the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi, and explores themes of identity, morality, and redemption. *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), This novel tells the story of Thomas Sutpen, a mysterious figure who rises to wealth and power in the antebellum South. The novel explores themes of race, identity, and the legacy of slavery. *A Fable* (1954), This novel tells the story of a group of World War I veterans who return home to Mississippi and explores themes of identity, morality, and redemption. *The Reivers* (1962), This novel tells the story of a group of people who steal a car and drive to a brothel in Memphis. The novel explores themes of identity, morality, and the decline of the American South.

### **3. Thematic Analysis of *The Sound and the Fury***

The protagonist, Caddy, in William Faulkner's novel *Benjy*, ascends a tree to observe the adults inside her house. The lower part of her soiled undergarments, indicating Caddy's early sexual behavior and eventual ruin, deeply saddens the three brothers. The novel highlights the importance of creating something one can be content with before one's death, rather than relying on the belief that one will leave a lasting impact after death. The sight of a young girl According to Faulkner, creating something of significance that will endure even after one's death is more fulfilling than relying on the belief that one will leave a lasting impact after death. A blossoming pear tree peering into the window during a funeral is far superior to the murky depths of despair. According to Faulkner, creating something of significance that will endure even after one's death is more fulfilling than relying on the belief that one will leave a lasting impact after death. Thinking you'll leave something is fine, but making something you can die with is better. The muddy bottom of a little doomed girl, climbing a blooming pear tree in April to gaze through the window at the funeral, is far more fitting.

*The Sound and the Fury* is a novel by Faulkner that begins with Benjy's thirty-third birthday, amidst his physical illness. The story follows Benjy's emotional struggles, including his sister Caddy's divorce and the sale of his field to a local golf club for Quentin's education. The second part, June 2, 1910, tells the story from Quentin Compson's perspective, as he becomes emotionally troubled due to memories of Caddy's promiscuity and her desire to marry another man. The third part, April 6, 1928, tells the story from the perspective of Jason, the third child in the family. Jason is a resentful and narrow-minded individual who takes over as the family's guardian after his father's death. His father's divorce forces him to work at the farm-supply business, where he displays strong resentment towards his sister Caddy (Evelyn Scott, 1929).

In 1928, Caddy assists her brother Benjy in dressing, despite their mother affectionately referring to him as “my unfortunate child.” The family acknowledges Benjy’s impairment and opposes his presence. Caddy remains unwavering in her love for him, and Benjy finds solace in her presence as she emits the scent of trees. This scene highlights the family’s acceptance of Benjy’s impairment and their unwavering support. Versh, feeling well, refuses to venture outside in cold weather for amusement. They pause in the hallway, and Caddy embraces them, smelling like pines. Versh inquires about their financial situation, but Caddy’s claim that they own a Cadillac suggests otherwise.

In William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, express yourself freely. Versh said. “I ain’t going out in that cold for no fun.” He continued, and we halted in the hallway. Caddy knelt, wrapped her arms around me, and pressed her cold, bright face against mine. She smelled like trees. “You’re not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. You’ve got your caddy. Haven’t you got your caddy?” (Faulkner, 2021, pp. 13). In “April 8, 1928,” Faulkner tells the story of the Compson family, with Dilsey as the narrator. The family faces numerous challenges, and Dilsey is the only character who can restore order. Jason discovers Miss Quentin has stolen money, and he must track her down due to his position. *The Sound and the Fury* ends with the Compson family’s deterioration, suggesting potential renewal or revitalization. The penultimate day before Easter Sunday, when Christ is believed to have risen, sets the stage for the chapter, symbolizing a profound allegory of salvation and hope.

#### **4. The Decline of Southern Aristocracy**

*Compson (1699-1945)* is a novel that chronicles the Compson family’s history from 1699 to 1945. The novel provides a detailed account of the family’s ancestry and the changes in their wealth after the events in the novel. The novel also mentions the Negro family, who served the Compson family as domestic workers. The author’s persistence in defending Southern ideals is evident in her comment, “I observed the beginning, and now I observe the end.” *The Sound and the Fury* is a literary work by William Faulkner that explores the relationship between time, memory, and the past. The novel features two main characters: Mr. Compson III, a lawyer who becomes an alcoholic in 1912, and Mrs. Caroline Bascomb Compson, a neglectful mother who neglects her children. Quentin Compson III, the oldest child, commits suicide due to his father’s nihilistic convictions and his inability to cope with Caddy’s promiscuity during her adolescence. In 1928, Roskus demonstrates a fatalistic conviction in a domestic setting, illustrating the decline of tolerance and fondness. He believes the Gibsons are wiser than the Compsons and questions immortality. Dilsey evokes quietness and a scent resembling toilet paper, emphasizing the household’s decline. William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* writes that:

“Going to be more than one more.” Dilsey said. “Show me the man what aint going to die, bless Jesus.”

“Dying aint all.” Roskus said.

“I knows what you thinking.” Dilsey said. “And they aint going to be no luck in saying that name, lessen you going to set up with him while he cries.”

“They aint no luck on this place.” Roskus said. “I seen it at first but when they changed his name I knowed it.”

“Hush your mouth.” Dilsey said. She pulled the covers up. It smelled like T.P. “You all shut up now, till he get to sleep.” (Faulkner, 2021, pp. 29)

*Jason Compson IV, the third child, is the sole character who supports his mother but is resentful and narrow-minded. He supports his mother alone and cannot send the message clearly. The novel's narrative structure fails to capture the author's voice, as he employs four distinct voices to emphasize the subjectivity of each narrative. The Sound and the Fury goes beyond a simple family drama, delving into the portrayal of parents who are not capable enough and their emotionally damaged children. A deeper understanding reveals a connection to Biblical ethos in the novel. Carvel Collins explores the similarities between Christian and Freudian concepts in the novel, noting that three parts of the narrative are centered around Easter Sunday, with Quentin's monologue incorporating the essence of Christ's encounter on Holy Thursday (Collins 1954).*

## **5. Existential and Nostalgia perspectives**

*Evelyn Scott asserts that The Sound and the Fury is a significant addition to the genre of fiction, depicting the decline of a household and the downfall of a regional aristocracy in a catastrophe of madness, irresponsibility, and psychological deviance. Maurice Coindreau believes that the entire work is filled with intense noise and anger that ultimately holds no meaning. Perrin Lowrey discusses the organization of the four divisions, the fragmented chronological order, and the repetitive progression (Perrin Lowrey, 1952). Mr. Compson, a cynical and emotionally detached individual, subscribes to determinism and fatalism, holding the belief that life lacks inherent significance and that his ability to change circumstances is limited. However, he upholds the ideals of chivalry and familial integrity that Quentin inherits. He jeopardizes the family's financial stability in order to secure Quentin's enrolment at Harvard, and he shares anecdotes that fuel Quentin's fixation on the family's reputation (M Coindreau · 1966).*

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual freedom, choice, and the inherent meaninglessness of life without purpose or direction. It asserts that humans must take responsibility for creating their own meaning in life without relying on religious, cultural, or traditional beliefs. Individuals have complete freedom to choose their actions and create their own meaning. With freedom comes the responsibility to accept the consequences of one's choices. The concept of subjective experience emphasizes the unique subjective experiences and perspectives of each individual. The human desire for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world can lead to feelings of absurdity and alienation. One should choose to live authentically and true to themselves instead of adhering to societal norms. Existentialist thinkers include Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus. Existentialism influences art, literature, and culture, encouraging individuals to embrace their uniqueness, take risks, and create their own purpose in life. "thinking nothing whatever of God one way or the other and simply considering the police and so fearing and respecting only the Negro woman, his sworn enemy since his birth" (Faulkner, 2021, pp. 263).

Nostalgia in *The Sound and the Fury* is a significant theme, particularly in relation to the Compson family's decline and the crumbling of their values. The characters' nostalgic recollections of their childhood and family history reveal their longing for a lost time and their inability to escape the past. The novel portrays the decaying Compson family and their crumbling mansion as a symbol of the decline of the Old South and its values. The characters confront the decay of their family, values, and way of life, leading to a sense of disillusionment and nostalgia for a bygone era. Benjy's non-linear narrative underscores the subjective nature of memory and its potential for distortion or romanticization. The characters' nostalgic

memories often revolve around a lost innocence, particularly Caddy's, which serves as a symbol of the family's lost purity and honor. The novel shows how the past is unattainable, and the characters' attempts to cling to it are futile, leading to a sense of nostalgia and melancholy. Through nostalgia, Faulkner explores the human experience of longing for a lost time and the futility of attempting to recapture it. The novel highlights how nostalgia can both preserve memories and distort reality, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of the characters' motivations and the decline of the Compson family.

## **6. The Asurdity of Human Existence**

The author recounts the tale of his grandfather's timepiece, which represents all aspirations and longings, and the author's belief that warfare does not lead to triumph. The watch vividly evokes the uninterrupted and gradually diminishing passage of time that went unnoticed. The author explores the notion of time and its influence on individuals, particularly Quentin, who inherits his grandfather's watch from his father. Caddy, disowned by her family, feels remorse for her promiscuous behavior but cannot fully understand Quentin's distress. Mrs. Compson's negligence and self-indulgence lead to the family's decline as she struggles with her own health issues and self-centered behavior towards Benjy, a young person with cognitive difficulties. Caroline decides to change the name of her youngest son from Maury to Benjamin to protect her family's reputation. Caddy plays a pivotal role, taking on a maternal role for Quentin and Benjy. Her early defecation, a sign of her sexual promiscuity, brings shame to the Compson family. Jason, the youngest member, displays malevolence and hatred, creating a distance between himself and the other children. Miss Quentin, the latest Compson lineage member, shares similarities with Caddy but also demonstrates discernible distinctions. Queenie feels a strong desire to participate in prayer for God's sake. "We had to take her up to bed then, and after things got quieted down a little I put the fear of God into Dilsey. As much as you can into a nigger, that is. That's the trouble with nigger servants, when they've been with you for a long time they get so full of self importance that they're not worth a dam. Think they run the whole family" (Faulkner, 2021, pp. 166).

The novel highlights the power of memory and the past in shaping individual identities. The characters' nostalgic recollections of their childhood and family history reveal their longing for a lost time and their inability to escape the past. Faulkner's portrayal of the decaying Compson family and their crumbling mansion symbolizes the decline of the Old South and its values. A sense of loss and regret tinges this nostalgia for a bygone era. The novel delves into the disillusionment of the post-Civil War era as the characters confront the decline of their family, their values, and their way of life. The crumbling Compson household reflects this disillusionment, symbolizing the disintegration of the Old South's grandeur. Faulkner's non-linear narrative structure emphasizes the subjective nature of time, demonstrating how individual experiences and perceptions of time can vary greatly. Quentin's character, haunted by his perceived failures and seeking redemption through his own destruction, embodies the novel's exploration of guilt and redemption themes. The Compson family's dysfunctional relationships and their struggles with communication, love, and loyalty serve as a microcosm for the decay of the Old South's social structures. The novel touches on issues of race and class, particularly through the character of Dilsey, the loyal and wise African American housekeeper, who serves as a symbol of stability and morality in a decaying world.

Queenie returns, and Ben's eyes regain their tranquil blue emptiness. As the novel nears its end, Benjy shouts loudly due to Lustre's incorrect direction around the town square. After Jason guides the carriage in the correct direction, Benjy feels tranquil. Despite its own fracture,

the broken narcissus flower serves as a reminder of the expectation of salvation that Easter symbolizes. The Compson family will undoubtedly not experience a resurrection. The scene unfolds on April 8th, 1928, as the narrator's surroundings return to their proper positions. In William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, it says, "The broken flower drooped over Ben's fist, and his eyes were empty, blue, and serene again as the cornice flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its own place" (Faulkner,2021,pp.252).

Dilsey, the sole provider of stability inside the Compson home, remains emotionally uninvolved in the family's decline. She remains steadfast in her refusal to let self-absorption taint her principles or inner essence. She demonstrates exceptional patience and selflessness by assuming responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and caring for the Compson children in the absence of Mrs. Compson. Dilsey appears to be the only individual in the home who genuinely prioritizes the well-being and moral development of the Compson children, demonstrating affection and impartiality towards all the children, including Benjy. The final chapter's emphasis on Dilsey suggests an aspiration for rejuvenation following the series of unfortunate events, as she emerges as the primary custodian of the Compson heritage, embodying the sole prospect of reviving the principles of the traditional South in an untainted and genuine manner.

## 7. CONCLUSION

*The Sound and the Fury* is a F. Scott Fitzgerald novel that explores the ethical decay of the Compsons family, a once prosperous and noble family from Mississippi. The narrative uses flashbacks to reveal events from three different perspectives: Benjy Compson, a cognitively impaired individual in his thirties; his elder sibling Quentin Compson, who has a refined sensibility and formal education at Harvard University; Jason IV, a mean-spirited and stingy younger brother; and an omniscient narrator recounting the family's downfall, particularly Dilsey, the maid who paradoxically becomes the unofficial matriarch of the family. Faulkner's final writings explored topics such as the disintegration of the American South, ethical quandaries, transgression, and salvation, but emphasized the essential essence of human existence. The Compsons confront the complex relationship between race and class awareness, inner tensions, familial reputation, feminine morality, societal conventions, the perceived organization of existence, and the progression of time. The narrative centers on the protagonists, Benjy, Caddy, and Quentin, who share a profound emotional bond with their mother, Mrs. Compson. Caddy's nonattendance leads to Benjy's disarray and bewilderment as she begins engaging in sexual activity, disrupting his sense of structure. Quentin reflects on the scarcity of affection he had from his mother during his early years, emphasizing the significant and detrimental consequences of Mrs. Compson's shortcomings as a parent.

Jason elucidates his motive for pursuing Miss Quentin, displaying sarcasm and self-pity. Jason harbors resentment towards Caddy due to her divorce from Herbert Head, which resulted in Jason losing the bank position that Herbert had previously assured him. Jason is bitter that Miss Quentin has managed to go with his money, and he begins to hold her responsible for all the sorrow that has befallen the family. The paradox lies in Jason's declaration that he will refrain from taking any action towards Miss Quentin, given that she is now beyond his reach, thereby intensifying his frustration. Mrs. Compson utters these lines upon discovering that Miss Quentin has fled. She initially entertains the idea that Miss Quentin may have committed suicide, but she quickly rejects this notion, believing that God would never permit her children to inflict such harm upon her. This comment offers a substantial amount of understanding of Mrs. Compson's cognitive reasoning. Mrs. Compson appears to believe that her aristocratic social rank provides her with exclusive advantages in the eyes of God. Throughout the story, Mrs. Compson consistently exhibits selfishness, obliviousness, and

consumerism. Despite abandoning and compromising the principles that established her family, she persists in using her lineage to validate her social status.

The novel's unique chronological structure creates a framework open to interpretation, reflecting the characters' deep concern with time. The main character-narrators, Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey, represent entities responsible for the progression of time. Faulkner divides his novel into four distinct sections, each employing unique narrative and stylistic elements. Parts 1 and 2 employ a non-linear narrative method, introducing Dilsey, the Compson household's servant, as an omniscient third-person narrator. The novel emphasizes the importance of time in contemporary art, as well as the temporal aspect of storytelling. Quentin, the main character, adheres to ancient beliefs and makes unsuccessful efforts to uphold his family's standing. His sense of responsibility drives him to protect Caddy's moral integrity, as he cannot bear Caddy's lack of interest in conforming to the expectations of a Southern woman.

Faulkner presents Quentin's thoughts in a chronological manner, within the context of a single recalled occurrence. The author aims to capture the key memory that serves as the foundation for Quentin's internal conflict, portraying him as temporarily unconscious while the recalled memory passes through his mind. The unit is understandable, yet it elicits intriguing questions. Quentin's main focus is on Caddy's loss of honor, while Jason is concerned with Caddy's illegitimate daughter. Benjy's perspective extends beyond Caddy or any particular aspect of her situation, encompassing a wider range of topics and individuals. The final segment of the story bears resemblance to Benjy's portion in its treatment of the Compson problem in a broad manner. However, it achieves the desired impact of thoroughness through a different approach. The juxtaposition of the initial and last portions with the two middle sections creates a well-balanced architectural structure for the novel, highlighting its comprehensive nature. By explicitly stating that the novel encompasses a far broader theme beyond Caddy's transgression and her family's response, the author expands upon the theme. The author intends to symbolize and depict a broader social order.

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