

Corrosion of Self of the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* of William Faulkner

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Abstract

The conspicuous feature of the novels of William Faulkner written in the post-World War era is the corrosion of self because the protagonists are seen struggling throughout the novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Corrosion of self is a totally new perspective in the study of deflation of self. Faulkner is confronted with the baffling problem of depicting a self that seems to have lost its reality. Darwinism led to the formation of the idea of the machine-man the image of the mechanical self. Kepler's laws and Freud's explorations of the unconscious brought home the realization that man is but an infinitesimal fraction of the energy that flows through the universe. In the age of Freud and Einstein, God ceased, as it were to reveal Himself in man, Declaring that "modernism and tragedy are incompatible". Joseph Wood Krutch had rightly pointed out that modern malaise, nausea, angst, alienation, loss of identity, entropy and nihilism were forces that had dehumanized and deflated the heroes. Indeed, modern playwright lacks potential to acknowledge "the awareness of the reality of death" (Fromm 245). In this paper the corrosion of self of the protagonists of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is explored relying on the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth.

Key Words: alienation, angst, corrosion, deflation, infinitesimal, malaise, psychological perspective

INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner is a novelist of despair and crisis of life. He brought revolution in the American fiction by introducing the themes of breakdown of marriage and family, love and sex in his novel *The Sound and the Fury*. After World War second, the new sense of uncertainty, anxiety and pessimism coupled with theological revolution, imparted a new awareness in the American novelists. The corrosion of self became an inevitable reality because this was an age in which man experienced alienation, nausea and angst. William Faulkner wrote about the decline of the Old South and the loss of glory and glamour. Faulkner has created disabled and mentally retarded characters in the

novels. Tony Tanner observes that Faulkner keenly observed the life of the people of the South who became emotionally sick because of the loss of the South; its glory and grandeur. Tennessee Williams depicted the loss of the grandeur of the South in his plays *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Streetcar Named Desire*. Both Amanda and Blanche are haunted by the memories of the glorious past and experience trauma in their life. Truth assumed a life- sustaining illusion. Mind, consciousness and soul are treated as illusive and meaningless things. For the existentialists like Jean -Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers, failure is the fate of man whose every project is doomed. In this situation action is futile and aspiration absurd. The existentialists thus gave eloquent expression to the current metaphysics of despair. Faulkner develops characters in his novels demonstrating the social and psychological problems that stem from the industrialization of the American South. Faulkner's characters exhibit mental and physical disabilities, through both stilted consciousness and impotency to indicate disabled progress and masculinity. The title of the novel is borrowed from Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* who says:

Life is but a walking shadow, It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
signifying nothing".(Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 204)

The plot of the novel focuses primarily on the sound and the fury of the Compson family representing the decadent feudal order of the Old South. The mood of nihilism, despair and anguish is depicted in the first three sections of the novel. Mr. Compson is in the mood of alcoholic as he uses liquor to escape the horrors and traumatic experiences of life. The novel is really a tale told by an idiot and the idiot is Benjy who is called "idiot" and "loony" by Jason because of his sobs, moans, and general crying. Benjy is a "mentally retarded" man in addition to an "idiot and Loony." Faulkner employs the stream of consciousness technique called interior monologue representing an attempt to transcribe a character's thoughts, sensations and emotions.

In Benjy's section the interior monologue technique is very effective. Benjy can't speak and being a narrator of the first section, the real story is narrated by others as Benjy is dumb and deaf and yet he can hear. Faulkner saw idiocy as a possible way for Compson to escape the ethical rigor of a code that depends on exertion of intellect and will. Benjy's role is both to reflect corrosion of self and degeneracy of Compson through forceful images and symbols. Sara McLaughlin published an article: "Faulkner's Faux Paus: Referring to Benjamin Compton as an Idiot" published in *Journal of Literature and Psychology*. She explored the traumatic life of Benjy who is a "person with autism." Faulkner has depicted the perceptions and observations of Benjy through the images of "rattling leaves", "rattling flowers" and "bright cold" suggesting inner turmoil of Benjy. He cannot interact with the external world as he lacks abstract language to communicate his experiences of events and

people. He is thirty three years old imbecile whom he called “truly innocent, that is, an idiot” (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 218).

Faulkner’s masterpiece *The Sound and the Fury* is “the embattled soul of man” as the plot of the novel is replete with the images of darkness; death and doom. The mental aberration and the corrosion of self of Benjy revealed naturally in terms of images and symbols by Faulkner. The novel opens with Benjy Compson’s description of “hitting”. Benjy says: “ 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” (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 5). Faulkner has depicted the limited perceptions of Benjy because of his mental retardation. The interior monologue of Benjy reveals his ceaseless fragmentation. Ironically, he is the narrator of the first section and through his perceptions and feelings the impending doom is referred in the novel. In the Benjy section, Faulkner presents the weak father and hypochondriac mother who create vacuity in the life of children. Critics observe that Benjy’s role in the novel is functionary. He is thoroughly objective. He records everything, indiscriminately and without bias. Benjy’s story depicts the fragmented vision of William Faulkner. The real corrosion of self can be found only in Benjy’s section as Faulkner remarks in his Introduction that “the story is all there in the first section as Benjy role it” (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 231). The way Benjy’s consciousness works is unfathomable. His mental limitations determine the kind of language and structure employed in his monologue. The plot of *The Sound and the Fury* presents the mind-wanderings of retarded adult who has never spoken a single word; and his words are the “indices” of a retarded mind. To Benjy, ice is a “piece of water” and for him darkness simply comes and goes at random. He cannot relate the coming of the “dark spot” in his cereal bowl to his consumption of its contents. When he burns his hand in the wood stove fire, Benjy makes no mental equation between fire and pain. He is unable to explain the traumatic experience in logical words: “My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back in my mouth” (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 72). Benjy doesn’t understand the relationships of cause and effect. That coldness produces ice, that eating produces an empty bowl and that fire burns; all these experiences are totally omitted in Benjy’s mind. He cannot understand a simple casual action; he cannot understand motive and intent. The reader enters the trauma through recognizing the departure from relatively coherent narrative to hallucinogenic descriptions of Benjy’s unconscious mental space. As the family is driving Benjy listens to the hooves of the horse and he sees shapes:

The bright shapes went smooth and steady on both sides, the shadows of them flowing across Quentin’s back. They continued like the bright tops of wheels. Then those on one side stopped at the tall white post where the soldier was. But on the other side they went on smooth and steady, but a little slower. (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 8)

Faulkner uses the poetic images and symbols to express the chaos of Benjy's world. He feels the "bright cold" (4). And he smells the sickness that is a "cloth folded on Mother's head" (75). He is ignorant of the operations of the universe, the assignment of a certain activity to a corresponding subject. He is all the time confused and bewildered and Faulkner has depicted the inner turmoil of his soul thus:

I couldn't see it, but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn't see myself, but my hands could see the slipper. (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 88)

For Benjy experiences are fragmented and disorderly; he can perceive them only in a fragmented and chaotic way. Benjy's intellect is eclipsed and his mental limitations are the result of his ill treatment given by his mother who neglected him all the time. He is treated as an animal and Faulkner gives him the identity of a dog. He makes unconscious efforts to transform reality into manageable experiences.

Faulkner has depicted the agonized state of mind of Benjy and on April 7, 1928, he continues feeling restless and agonized. His memories of Caddy's use of perfume, her loss of virginity, her wedding, his drunkenness and castration are painful and traumatic experiences. Burton also opines that Benjy remembers Caddy so frequently because: "while everyone else reads him on their own narrow terms, Caddy alone engages him dialogically...because Caddy alone persistently offers her brother the hope of speech, her absence signals for Benjy the lost possibility of genuine dialogue" (Burton 218). Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* is a study of the old past as the novelist explores the corrosion of self of the characters. Faulkner openly admitted that "There is no such thing as was because the past is" (Rollyson 2). The characters of the novel are often lost in their past and the main problem for them is how to relate to the past. The main cause of their corrosion of self is their inability to forget the past; the destruction or survival of all the major characters of *The Sound and the Fury* can be traced to how they remember the past.

The climax of the novel reaches with the loss of virginity of Caddy and this loss is symbolic of the loss of the glamour and grandeur and the conservative values of the Old South. Caddy is too immature to fuse and balance her intense affection for her brothers. Her love for life and sexual pleasures urge her to date with the town boys. She expresses her passionate love for Dalton Amis; steals money and elopes with him. The love of the two brothers pulls her back to accept dead concepts of honor and virtue which she neither believes nor can practice. She is in a dilemma because she can neither pacify the anguish of her brothers nor immolate her passion for life. Caddy gives up Dalton thinking that he has harmed her brothers and realizes that it was her mistake to fall in love with Dalton. She follows the road to promiscuity. Her giving up of Dalton was the beginning of her emotional bankruptcy and death. She says: "I died last year I told you I had" (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 153). Quentin is a Southern who can live without his values inherited from his ancestors of the Old South and this linkage causes him trauma. The section of Quentin revolves around ideas of incest,

sexuality, and many other aspects related to the seduction of Caddy. The loss of her virginity constitutes a traumatic event leading to the corrosion of herself. It caused psychological torture to all the brothers and particularly to Quentin. Faulkner has depicted the inner turbulent world of Quentin in the last days of his life using the lyrical language and the poetic images and symbols. Quentin is so much stressed that he commits suicide to overcome the humiliation of the family caused by the sexual adventures of Caddy. He writes a letter to his father and to his roommate Shreve. He walks to a bridge and looks down at the water, thinking of shadows and of drowning:

The shadows of the bridge, the tiers of railing, my shadow leaning flat upon the water, so easily had I tricked if that it would not quit me. At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned. (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 57)

Quentin's suicide by drowning is a way to escape from the shameful past as he can no longer live with bitterness of the wound caused by loss. His narrative structure makes it clear that his response of the loss is natural and inevitable. His narrative is evocative of the psychological trauma of the narrator. It is told from within the mind of Quentin, on the day he commits suicide. It plunges into the depths and the causes of loss and its psychological effects. Quentin's main concern is not human related but abstract objects of virginity, virtue, pride and honor. His obsessive anxiety over them results in neurosis which deepens and grows worse with time. His idealism comes in conflict with the realities of the external world as he fails to comprehend the mysteries of sex which often regulates the life of the young people. He refuses to accept reality and fails to understand the force of natural impulses that drove Caddy to promiscuity. Faulkner has given reference to many sexual symbols that haunt the imagination of Quentin. There are two other powerful symbols which symbolize his defeat. He wishes to kill Caddy with his dagger. The gun offered to him by Dalton is again a phallic symbol. Quentin's inability to use both the weapons on both occasions symbolizes his rejection of reality. The problem with Quentin is that he fails to strike a balance between his idealism and the reality of the external life.

Janet (1889) observes that "traumatic events and memories persist as unassimilated fixed ideas that act as foci for the development of alternate states of consciousness, including dissociative phenomena such as fugue states, amnesia, and chronic states of helplessness and depression" (Janet 123). Following the Freudian claim in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, it can be argued that Quentin is a victim who is doomed to "repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of remembering it as something belonging to past" (341) Quentin is doomed to repeat and remember Dalton Amis as "something belonging to the past" The loss of Caddy's virginity is engraved in his psyche a deep wound. The wound in *The Sound and the Fury* leads to the corrosion of self of the characters in the novel.

CONCLUSION

The total effect of the novel *The Sound and the Fury* is sense of loss, depression and the feeling of doom. Faulkner uses the imagery of sound and shadows to depict the loss of self of his characters. He presents his narrative design with sound beyond dialogue to inform and inflect the destabilizing narrative voices. His rich use of sound is a recurring motif to animate the action of the novels. The “indescribable sound” opens, punctuates and closes the novel. The bells and sounds are the sources of sickness and depression to the characters. In the Disley section “screaming of the Jaybirds” is heard. Disely is heard singing sweet songs in the kitchen (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 166) but the overall effect is pessimistic, depressing predicting the fall of the house of Compson. Faulkner describes the harrowing experiences of the characters that lead to the disintegration of self through hallucinogenic images. He indicates the placement of traumatic events. Caruth observes that “in its most definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11).

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