



The Dark Tragedy of Human Destiny in *The Sound and the Fury*

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ABSTRACT

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929, portrays the sequence of tragic events a southern American family faces at the beginning of the twentieth century. The turn of the century brought significant changes in values and family life; thus, the transition from the traditional to the new, from the past to the present was painful. In this sense, Faulkner depicts how the characters experience various downfalls, which they cannot resist in his novel. The conflicted relationships between the family members are the primary sources of their wrongdoings. Even though they sometimes attempt to break the circle of misfortune, they cannot succeed. In this sense, this study will examine how the concept of dark tragedy is implemented in *The Sound and the Fury*, regarding the tragedy of human destiny.

1. Introduction

Tragedy is generally described "as a serious play or, by extension, a novel representing the disastrous downfall of a central character, the protagonist" (Baldick, 1990: 226). Although William Faulkner's creative and probably the most appreciated and strongest fiction, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), cannot be put into the category of tragedy as a genre, it strongly involves the concept of tragedy since it describes the tragedy of an old Southern family which experiences a decline or tragic fall. Warwick Wadlington states that Faulknerian tragedy, "springs from the hazardous possibilities for heroic existence in his particular version of an honour-shame culture as well as from the critique of this cultural script" (1987: 8). *The Sound and the Fury* was Faulkner's first novel to make form and method crucial. The guiding

assumption in any consideration of its structure should be that there are plausible reasons for the four sections' layout and for using the stream of consciousness approach in the first three but not the fourth. Jean-Paul Sartre's comment that "he notices that he is telling another story" makes such an assumption necessary to understand *The Sound and the Fury* and Faulkner's method and achievement (Vickery, 1954). The novel's tragedy resides in the inability of her three brothers, without the bravery to perceive her insights, to comprehend Caddy's vitality and her dynamic existence and affection, which are inevitably estranged from them (Messerli, 1974). Faulkner uses honour-shame culture in *The Sound and the Fury* as well, and he portrays how people cannot overcome it. He converts personal fears into a

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narrative with significant cultural ramifications. The biographical context of Faulkner's artistic breakthrough in this novel is noteworthy to consider. His reunion with Estelle Oldham Franklin was profoundly significant to him, despite the impending sorrow of their marriage (Bassett, 1981). The novel, set in Mississippi in the early 20th century, portrays the turbulent decline of the Compson family in this respect. There are four portions to the book, each told by a different narrator on a different day. While the fourth segment is recounted from an omniscient, third-person perspective, the previous three sections are each related by one of the three Compson brothers—Benjy, Quentin, and Jason.

The protagonist of the story is Caddy Compson, the brothers' sister. Benjy is a mentally challenged 33-year-old man who is mute and has limited awareness of his surroundings. He narrates the first part of the novel, which is set in 1928. His understanding of events is fragmented and incomplete because his present-day observations are combined with recollections from his youth. He remembers how he was calling Caddy in his childhood, "here, caddy," which creates an atmosphere of nostalgia. Caddy is now married and living away from home. Some episodes are used to give what happened in the past. However, the importance of many of Benjy's jumbled memories is not immediately apparent. What is most evident is Benjy's deep bond with Caddy, who has a "tree-like" odour. Nearly 18 years have passed since Caddy's wedding, yet Benjy is still waiting for her by the gate. The themes of memory, nostalgia, and loss, which also contribute to the theme of tragedy are clearly observed.

The second part of the book describes a significant tragic event—Quentin's final day before he kills himself. Quentin is a Harvard student, but his obsessions with his sister's sexuality and his marriage to Herbert Head overshadow his desire to succeed in his life. Quentin's narration resembles Benjy's because of the repeated intrusion of memories from the past into the present. The thoughts are fragmented, jump from one to the other, and are frequently interrupted by daily dialogues. Thus, the reader witnesses the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters. Quentin is trapped in the past like Benjy is. The sound of his father's watch keeps him in at

present. He wakes to the sound of his father's watch; thus, his confused mind is ordered at these moments. In this part, we read about Quentin, who will get to the train station. However, after leaving the city, he strolls beside a river. He remembers how he suggested that they and Benjy flee to a place where no one would recognize them in an effort to stop Caddy from marrying Herbert. His thoughts in this part describes as a would-be tragic character. Because of his instable psychological mood and his obsession with his sister's marriage, we foreshadow that a tragedy is waiting for him. He is very obsessed with his sister that he cannot leave thinking about Caddy. The tragic flow comes soon. When he eventually makes his way back to his hotel room in town, he prepares to commit suicide. While doing so, he thinks back to a chat he had with his father about his affections for Caddy and his fervent attempt to save her from being married.

The third section is a transition between generations. Now, the reader is introduced Caddy's daughter, Quentin, who is described as a misfit. She is described by Jason as, "Once a bitch, always a bitch". Because she is frequently absent from school and Jason has a hard time with her. Jason personally drives her to school before stopping at the post office on his way to work at Earl's store. He remembers Quentin's placement with the family after Caddy was abandoned by her husband. Since then, Caddy has only encountered once with her daughter. Caddy persuades Jason to take her to see Quentin after her father's burial. Jason drives with Quentin in a carriage, giving Caddy only a brief sight of the girl. The first letter Jason reads is from Caddy and contains a check for her daughter's support that is addressed to Mrs. Compson. However, Jason seizes the money. The tragedy Caddy and her daughter faces is apparent. Jason is an authoritative dominant figure for Quentin. Once, Jason sees Quentin with a man from the program. He ultimately pursues them in his car along a wagon route, but they manage to escape by inflating one of his tires, leaving him stranded. Jason is a threatening and evil character in the family.

On Easter Sunday, Jason comes down from his room and accuses Luster and Benjy of shattering his bedroom window when Dilsey prepares breakfast. Later, they realize that Quentin's room

is empty, and her bed has not been touched. Additionally, he finds that someone has broken into the metal box he keeps concealed in his closet. After reporting a robbery to the sheriff, Jason departs the residence. A short while later, Dilsey, Luster, and Benjy go to a particular Easter service where they hear a moving speech from a visiting preacher named Reverend Shegog. Quentin has run away with the travelling company, and their next stop is Mattson. Jason drives to that place, and he tries to get his stolen money. He finds them; however, he fights with one of the showmen. His effort to get his money back is fruitless. The tragic events the Compson family faces are transmitted from one generation to the other; thus, Faulkner pursues the idea of tragedy from the beginning to the end.

2. The Dark Tragedy of Human Destiny in The Sound and the Fury

What we could call 'the dark tragedy of human destiny' in the works of Faulkner resembles the Greek tragedy in many ways; there is no way for the characters to escape from their fates (Halman, 1963: 24). Thus, in Faulkner's novel, the central theme that is the decline of an aristocratic Southern family whose members cannot escape from their tragic destiny is represented by the Compson family. The decline of that Southern family is constructed on all the family members. However,

the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* live their tragedies contrary to the ancient Greek heroes. The hero of Greek tragedy is cursed because of committing a fatal sin. However, in Faulkner, everybody has been cursed since the beginning. The curse is the fate itself and as the human is cursed s/he has to commit the sin. (Halman, 1963: 28)

Undoubtedly, the causes of the collapse in the Compson family are multiple. At the same time, the effects of this tragedy are different for each character, so they experience different kinds of "waste" in their lives. Thus, first of all, it is essential to examine the causes of the tragedy the Compson family experiences and give the impacts of that waste on the lives of the characters.

The structure of the South was beginning to change at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The old South, which was based on moral values and traditional ideals, gave great importance to the family concept. The family, as a minor representative of that conventional Southern world, was a basic structure that had to be saved and respected. These aristocratic families had adopted traditional Southern values. The status of the individuals of these families depended on some conventional principles. Men and women had customary roles. For men, being a gentleman, defending the honour of the family, and morality were fundamental ideals. For women, being a mother figure, a model of purity and virginity, holding the name of the family as an ideal Southern woman were some of the fundamental aspects.

The background of the Compson family comes from such a traditional basis. That family with four children and several servants seems like a typical one at the beginning of the novel. They have land on which their workers work, their children grow up, and their close friends are hosted. However, the main lack in that family is the father and mother figure. We see that Mr. and Mrs. Compson are passive parents who cannot deal with their children and their problems. Surely, the family concept was a central issue in Southern world. So, the decay of family values was the beginning of their downfall. When the parents lost their influence on their children as a moral shaping element, the values that were holding the family together began to disappear.

Although Mr. Compson is portrayed as a gentleman, it cannot be said that he is enough to be a fair father figure. His insufficiency to interrupt their children's lives or at least to direct them to the right doings shows that he isn't an ideal father who can hold the family together and prevent their downfall. Besides Mr. Compson, Mrs. Compson is unable to hinder the tragedy of her family. On the contrary, she contributes to the family tragedy in a different way. Mrs. Compson is always in self-pity without any sense of her children's expectations. She is totally away from being a mother figure. In the novel, we always see her when she is complaining about her children, her health and her status in the family or giving instructions to their black servant Dilsey to take

care of the children. There is no scene in which she pays any attention to her children. Although she has a mentally ill son, Benjy, she doesn't show any concern about his needs or feelings. She even escapes from looking at him, so she always makes Dilsey care for his 'idiot' son Benjy. Mrs. Compson's voice is always cold and uncommunicative. As Jason says, "her mother is calling Quentin's name with machinelike regularity". Consequently, she is less than a mother, more like a miniature of a mother figure.

It is obvious that the Compson parents are insufficient as mother and father figures. They are unable to communicate with their children, and most importantly, they are unable to love them. Thus, the lack of love and communication breaks that family apart. As a result of that breakup, both the family concept is destroyed, and each of the characters experiences an individual tragedy.

Besides the personal incapability of the Compson parents, the economic and sociological changes in American society had a negative influence on the Compson family at that time period. The novel can be accepted as a product of the transitional period in American history. This transition period covers the time phase between the pre-Civil War South and the contemporary South. The shift from the old South to a new one created a new consciousness. Indeed, the effects of this period were crucial and resulted in changes both in the society as a significant influence and in the families as minor ones, and 'the decline of the aristocratic Southern family' was an inevitable consequence. The root of the Compsons is based on an old conventional Southern line. Their world is the land on which they have been living for years. But the economic changes transform the Southern agricultural structure. In that agricultural structure, "land" was the main issue which put a Southern family together. However, primarily by selling their property to send Quentin to Harvard and pay for Caddy's wedding costs, the Compsons have more difficulty. As 'land' is the inseparable part of an agrarian family, losing it makes the family break up.

In accordance with that economic change, the sociological alteration negatively affects the Compsons. As they are not living in the Victorian age anymore, they experience the dramatic change

of the modern period. In such a case, the effects of the changing Victorian values and the family's powerlessness to stand against those changes are other causes giving rise to their waste and tragedy. The members of the Compson family face an unknown world that is full of dishonesty. As they are incapable of getting along with that corruption, they are lost in the realities of the modern world.

As mentioned before, the family concept was a central issue in the Southern world. So, the decay of family values was an essential effect on that decline. When the parents lost their influence on their children, the values holding the family together began to fracture. As a result of that fracture, the concept of an ideal Southern family disappeared. So, the Compson family, with all its members, becomes an example of a disoriented Southern family. That disorientation into the new world was a destructive issue. Leaving old values and adopting new ones was difficult. Although the new generation was eager to leave the Southern tradition behind and adapt to the modern world, that was not the way to salvation. Because of the decline of a conventional aristocratic Southern family, which was constructed on moral values and had strong links to its past, a ruthless and impetuous generation was taking its place. So, the emergence of a ruthless and dishonoured generation was on the scene. To illustrate, Caddy, by rejecting the old southern values and traditions, such as the importance of virginity, tries to adapt to the new world as a free individual. But she also becomes a tragic figure by refusing these conventional values. Furthermore, Caddy's daughter Quentin being the product of that disgraced family and without any father, is the most important symbol of that ruthless generation. Thus, "the author demonstrates tragic characters using a kind of logical order by dealing with the main tragedy that is related to Caddy's virginity. He shows that around this main tragic event, the other characters are affected so tragically. Thence, the Compson family's values and fame begin to ooze away" (Aşçı, 2019: 5-6)

As we see, the inability to bond between the old values and new standards creates chaos both in the family life and the characters' mental worlds. Contrary to Caddy, her brother Quentin is strongly associated with traditional values and his past. His

tragedy comes from his obsession with his past and moral values. As an obsessive person who cannot escape the idea of incest and accept the idea of his sister's pregnancy that is out of marriage, he experiences a severe mental breakdown. In the end, he finds that the only solution is to commit suicide. As he chooses the way of memory rather than action, he is trapped in his past. "Quentin is trapped by time, unable to escape from his memories of the past. He attempts to escape time's grasp by breaking his watch, but its ticking continues to haunt him. He sees no solution but suicide" (Aşçı, 2019: 8). Although he could be a successive person- as he studies at Harvard before committing suicide- his life becomes a waste.

In this sense, Mr. Compson's tragedy is similar to Quentin's. He is unable to protect his family, and he cannot control the events happening around them. That's why he chooses to accept everything as usual and unimportant. Even about the pregnancy of his daughter, Caddy, he is strangely ordinary. Although Mr. Compson tries to convince Quentin that Caddy's pregnancy is normal and a natural outcome of being a woman, he is incapable of accepting this situation. His sensitive reaction against that situation is not because of his understanding and accepting the new world as it is, but because of his incapability to fight against it. Consequently, by losing his family's honour and not being able to do anything to save it, he becomes an alcoholic and cannot prevent the tragic downfall of his family.

The tragic decline of the Compson family doesn't end with the frustrated lives of Quentin's suicide, Caddy's desertion or Mr. Compson's death as an alcoholic man. After their abandonment, the Compsons keep going with the other members of the family; Mrs. Compson, Jason, Miss Quentin and Benjy. As mentioned before, Mrs. Compson is an insufficient mother who cannot deal with family problems. After those tragedies, her sense of self-pity and helplessness deepen. She becomes a person permanently complaining about her fate. In addition to Mrs. Compson, his son Jason is a tragic character. Although he sees himself as the most vigorous and essential person in the family, his downfall is spiritual, the worst of all. He is a materialistic and fake man who does everything to have more money. He lies both to his mother and

to his niece about the money Caddy sends. He takes all the money that Caddy sends for her daughter, Quentin. As a person without any sense of honesty, Jason becomes a waste. When Miss Quentin steals the money that was actually stolen from her by Jason, he loses the biggest thing he has given importance. Although he has been able to understand and believe in the material world with its new values, he experiences the tragedy of this new world. In fact, he is defeated with his own weapon that is money and deception. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner transcends the constraints of time and place, utilising stream of consciousness to depict the depraved and strange atmosphere of the Compson family. This novel also adeptly employs stream of consciousness techniques, showcasing the author's exceptional literary prowess while illuminating themes of selfishness, greed, and the inherent ugliness of humanity, with a penetrating critique of societal ethical norms. (Lianghong, 2024:27)

The themes of tragedy and waste are considerably apparent in the third-generation member of the Compsons, by the existence of Miss Quentin. As Dilsey says, we see the beginning and the end of the process of tragedy. Miss Quentin is the last to take the theme of tragedy to the climax. By stealing her Uncle Jason's money and escaping with a boy from a travelling show, she makes the situation more tragic. Miss Quentin is the heroine of the last scene of that ongoing tragedy. She is the tragic follower of her mother, Caddy, and her Uncle Quentin. Mrs. Compson talks about her granddaughter as follows:

"...she has inherited all of the headstrong traits. Quentin's too. I thought at the time, with the heritage she would already have, to give her that name, too.

Sometimes I think she is the judgment of both of them upon me."

The transmission of misfortunes and the wrong choices from the earlier generation to the next is reflected in this quotation. Like inheriting the name of her uncle, Quentin is considered to have inherited the tragic destiny her family members faced.

3. Conclusion

Faulkner reflects the tragedy of his age in such a universal dimension that the dark tragedy also appears universal in his work. "Although the novel is about characters who fail or merely endure, it defines out of their suffering—as does all tragedy—the missing values which would make it possible for them to prevail" (Thickstun, 1988: 142). The man seems to have no power, even freedom or honour against fate... Man neither creates his own tragedy himself nor can resist the catastrophe that is his own destiny (Halman, 1963: 25-28). As we see, the downfall of the Compsons, once noble and gracious, results in tragedy and devastation. This tragedy is the fate of those three-generation Compsons as all of the members of the family experience a kind of desolation in a different way.

None of the family members can be successful in their lives, contrarily; each of them experiences different downfalls. Caddy loses her innocence with a baby without any father, her brother Quentin commits suicide, the father, Mr. Compson dies as an alcoholic man, and Mrs. Compson as a tragic figure, Caddy's daughter Quentin steals the money from Uncle Jason and escapes to an unknown future, and finally, poor Benjamin is sent to the asylum. Thus, Faulkner gives the decline of a Southern family in its tragic notion by giving the frustration of each character. Like Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth from which Faulkner took his novel's title "The Sound and The Fury," that novel is a despairing part of the tragic 'recorded time' that is 'full of sound and the fury'.

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