

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*: A Study in Despair and Nihilism

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Dr. Ravindra Kumar

Senior Lecturer, Department of English,
Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut.
Email: kumar_ravi@rediffmail.com

[Abstract: William Faulkner, the greatest innovator in the history of American fiction, is unanimously regarded as one of the best American novelists. In *The Sound and the Fury* he has shown modern society as a "waste land" where human beings have lost their natural response to the goodness of life. They are feeling lost and alienated in the modern, materialistic world of today. They feel that they belong to nobody and nobody belongs to them. The novel records the fall of a southern family and the death of an American society. Nihilism is the dominant mood of the book that has been beautifully conveyed by the very title derived from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The characters of the book also convey a sense of loss and despair. Leaving Dilsey, the Negro servant, almost all the characters of *The Sound and the Fury* create awesome feelings of despair in the hearts of the readers. For almost all the characters of the book, life has been a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." The mood of nihilism is conveyed by the members of the Compson family where human beings are either nihilists, neurotics, idiots, materialists, promiscuous or they are too weak to tolerate the burden of the problems and ultimately commit suicide. A sense of loss runs throughout the first three sections of the novel and it's only during the last section that we find a ray of hope amid darkness and chaos. The paper aims to reveal this very sense of loss and despair in *The Sound and the Fury*.]

Key words: Endurance in Relation to the Modern Society; Modern Society as "waste land"; Man's Position in the Universe in Relation to Despair; Manicind as Scarecrow Filled with Sawdust; Promiscuity as a Result of Irresponsible Behavior of Parents; Modern Human Beings Behaving like Automaton; Caddy as Nymphomaniac?; Caddy Representing Libido; Ennui, Despair, Boredom, Mental Vacuity and Emotional Sterility as Symptoms of Modern Human Beings.

William Faulkner is unanimously considered by many readers and critics to have been America's greatest modern writer. In creative genius, in the ability to construct a world of imagination in which reality is more accessible than it is in the everyday actualities of life, Faulkner has few peers. He can be called the central pillar upon which the edifice of American literature rests. He is a kind of writer whose full stature can't be measured in any single work. To understand his genius properly one should have a deep knowledge

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of all his works for each work unfolds a different aspect of his mind. Like an Onion he is a multi-layered personality in a true sense. The more an Onion is peeled, the whiter, the juicier, the richer it emerges from inside. The same may be said about Faulkner's mind. Each layer unfolds a different quality, a different dimension to be studied deeply.

If we try to have a look at Faulkner's personal life, we'll find it replete with a number of disappointments. Right from his bitter relationship with his father to his unfulfilled passion to be a part of the American army he remained a loser. Perhaps the very circumstances of his life made him bitter towards life and that's why Faulkner, at some places in his books, seems to be enveloped with gloom and despair. The same sense of loss and despair Faulkner reflected in his notable work *The Sound and the Fury*. William Faulkner of 1929 (the year of the publication of *The Sound and the Fury*) is quite different from William Faulkner of 1949, the year he received Nobel Prize. His Nobel Prize address, "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance", does not seem to fit the characters of *The Sound and the Fury*. Though Dilsey, the Negro servant of the Compson family, is an exception. This book of Faulkner has occasioned wide critical interest. Interpretations have ranged from Sartre's declaration that it is a metaphysical novel concerned with time to Irving Howe's conclusion that it is a social novel depicting the deterioration of a family and of the American South. The scope of the book is so wide that, like a Shakespearean play, it can sustain any number of specialized interpretations. One basic fact that most of these interpretations touch upon is that the novel dramatizes deterioration from the past to the present. A tragic sense of loss is so predominant and pervasive in each section and in almost every scene, that it can be considered the basic theme of the novel- a theme similar to that of Eliot's "The Waste Land."

This is the first notable book which brought him much awaited recognition and established him as an author of great caliber. It was most probably because Faulkner was struggling with some personal difficulties during this time. He portrays men as weak creatures without endurance and who are incapable of rising above their selfish need. Again Dilsey is an exception who is potentially great and justifies Faulkner's Nobel Prize address. The present paper proposes to analyze *The Sound and the Fury* vis-à-vis despair and nihilism shown by Faulkner so recurrently in it.

While reading the novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, the mood of nihilism emerges automatically in the minds of the readers. The reader of this text cannot be blamed for this nothingness for the very text of the novel originates through such notions. The title of the novel is derived from the famous speech of Macbeth, the hero of the tragedy *Macbeth*:

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Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

The despair and nihilism conveyed by this passage is the dominant mood of the novel that forces human beings to meditate on the hollowness of the modern world. The nihilistic mood of the novel is created to a great extent by the reactions of the Compson brothers to the intrusion of reality upon their childhood world. Caddy's sexual maturity initiates that intrusion for Benjy and for Quentin and the consequences of her maturation affect Jason's ambitions and Caddy's dreams.

So far as the content of the book is concerned it reveals a multifarious range of characters who are the very epitome of *Nada* and for whom life has been a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Almost all the characters of the book are made of weak stuff without any endurance. Either they are great cynical fellows, neurotics, idiots, promiscuous, materialists or they are so weak that they cannot tolerate the burden of the problems of life and thus commit suicide. They are basically the very part of modern mechanized and industrialised society that dehumanizes man by forcing him to cultivate false values. In this modern society man works like an automaton. Working with machines man himself has become just like machine: insensitive and senseless. He is feeling lost and alienated in this materialistic world of today. He feels that there is nothing which belongs to him or he belongs to that. He has lost his natural response to life: his religion is an empty formalism, and he is incapable of love. *The Sound and the Fury* has been written to elaborate this very situation where human beings are shown at the height of despair and nihilism.

The book unfolds the story of the decline of a Southern American family consisting of six members- Mr. and Mrs. Compson and their four children- Benjy, Quentin, Caddy and Jason. Faulkner, with the help of the power of the written words, has wonderfully been successful to make the readers hear, feel and peep into the very widows revealing the hearts of the characters. Mr. Compson, the head of this family is a cynical and detached father who spends most of his time in drinking and performing the role of a gentleman. He is a nihilist who believes that mankind is no more than a scarecrow stuffed with sawdust. According to Mr. Compson life is essentially useless and has no values outside those of personal pleasure. His views about women are very shocking and demoralizing as he calls them evil things. A father of four children, he never pays attention towards them. He never gives them the kind of love a father is supposed to give to his children. He is not even concerned about Caddy's promiscuity and states,

"women are never virgins, purity is a negative state, and therefore, contrary to nature." (SAP, 134) Moreover he believes that all human activities are meaningless and man is the sum of his misfortunes. His behavior reflects nothing but despair and nihilism. Mrs. Compson is the other character of the book reflecting the very mood of despair. She, in a real way, is responsible for the decline of the Compson family. She is a whining neurotic with an egocentric concern for herself and pays no attention towards her children. Throughout the book she never seems to take the responsibilities of a mother and leaves her children to the care of Dilsey, the Negro servant. Caddy is the worst affected person of her odd behavior. Had she behaved like a true mother Caddy would not have turned to be a promiscuous. Her self-absorption, the hypochondria and her pedantic whining leave no room for the love her children need so critically. She shows no positive attitude and behaves like someone whose soul is covered with despair.

Quentin, the other character of this book is a neurotic like Eliot's Prufrock. He is a Shakespearean Hamlet also when he is not capable to decide the things properly. Like Hamlet he thinks, plans but is not capable to execute. He is so weak that he is almost unable to tolerate the burden of problems and finally commits suicide by drowning himself in the water. He is the very epitome of Faulkner's despair and nihilism. He basically represents the weakness of modern man as he believes that nothing is worth living here. He has developed incestuous desire for Caddy and this makes him extremely frustrated partly because it is forbidden or sinful, and partly because it has not been fulfilled. He is Faulkner's image of man aware of his dispossession, but unable to endure or transcend it, living at an extreme of exacerbated consciousness, Quentin cannot dispose of the problems thrown up by that consciousness. Without an ordering code of that belief, he is left entirely to the mercy of his perceptions, and these bring him little but chaos and pain. He feels that a familiar sin, because it would be there, undeniable and gross, is preferable to the routine of drift. He tries to persuade himself that he has had incestuous relations with Caddy. His story of incest is fictitious but not merely a fantasy. When he turns to his father for help, the elder Compson can offer him only the nihilistic views. Thus Quentin yearns for death - the clean flame that will burn out consciousness and guilt, for he can exist neither in the realm of senses, which he fears, nor in the realm of intellect, where he stumbles. Unable to forget the conscience of his race, he ends as a wanderer in an alien city; the lost son of Jefferson, Mississippi finds death in the Charles River of Massachusetts.

Jason is the other character who, by his behavior, creates despair in the hearts of the readers. He is a great materialist whose only aim is to get money either by hook or by crook. He is in a way a devilish character who can go to any extent to fulfill his materialistic dreams. He is shrewd and callous who exists solely for his own sake and who believes that the entire world should exist along the lines that he thinks are right.

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He has no emotional attachment with any of his family members. He cheats his own sister Caddy and even goes to the extent of cheating his mother who loves him the most of all the Compson children. Honestly speaking he is a typical modern Waste Lander who stands for modern commercialization. His very behavior creates a sense of despair in the very hearts of the readers. Benjy, the youngest child of the Compson family is a born idiot, incapable of thinking seriously and rationally and even expressing himself in words. He is incapable of performing any lucid act or offering any hope for future. He symbolizes the degeneracy of modern world. Thus his world has been punctured by a sense of loss. From the very first scene to the last, Benjy is tormented by the sensation of loss, and struggles to rectify or replace what is missing. Caddy, the only daughter of the Compson family, seems to be somehow lively but she brings stigma to the name of her family. She is the only vibrant, warm and loving person in the family but the way she behaves in the book provides a sense of loss and despair to the readers. During her early adolescence, Caddy begins to attract boys to react to them. At fourteen, she becomes interested in clothing, dresses herself up prettily and uses a bit of perfume. At seventeen she surrenders herself to Dalton Ames. Her loss of virginity produces a neurotic furor in the family. Her character has been variously interpreted by many critics. To Charles Anderson, "Caddy is only a promiscuous nymphomaniac". To Carvel Collins, she represents the libido, and "... her development as chartered in the novel is a twisting of the libido's normal development toward full sexuality." Bowling is of the view that "... Caddy is essentially like Jason in that she is a naturalist and never rises above her natural state." Foster on the other hand describes her as "sensitive, beautiful girl, but given to bitchery from her early teens." Caddy had affairs with several men resulting in her pregnancy. Some critics believe that Caddy, by having such sexual relations with a number of men, is trying to reject everything that is related to the honor of the Compson family. But this according to me is not a proper way to register a grudge against the family you belong to. Her very behavior reflects a sense of loss and makes the reader morbid. Her sense of despair is further evident in her willingness for Quentin to kill her or commit incest with her. It makes no difference to her which alternative he chooses: "yes I'll do anything you want me to anything yes." (175) Her personal well being is a matter of little concern to her, and her independence seems to have disappeared. Miss Quentin, the illegitimate child of Caddy also provides a sense of loss and frustration by her behavior to the readers. Like Caddy she also starts having affairs with boys at an early age. In a way she is worse than her mother because her mother at least realized her moral fall, Miss Quentin never seems to repent for what she has done in her life. Her final act of elopement with her red-tied lover puts the last nail in the coffin of the Compson household.

Thus a complete survey of the book makes the reader aware of the fact that life for

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"without" All the characters seem to lead a directionless and meaningless life. They all reveal gloom, pessimism, despair and nihilism in one form or other. Out of this Waste Land, Dilsey is the only character who provides a ray of hope. She is the one member of this Compson household who represents a unifying and sustaining force. When Faulkner says that human beings will endure, he seems to indicate towards the Negroes like Dilsey. In contrast to Mrs. Compson's careless attitude, Dilsey exhibits charity and good sense. She is a proof of the very fact that only a gifted author like Faulkner can salvage significant images of life from the most familiar notions. She is the one who embodies love, force and fulfilled identity, and who shows, as Irving Howe has put it, "a sense of honor towards every person in her habit." The mood of despair and nihilism that is present in the very first three sections of the book is diminished during the fourth one through Dilsey. She is a humble servant who is one of those, "who pardon one another for the sake of love and who endure weakness and tribulation" and "who peacefully shall endure."

Thus all the characters of the book present the sum of loss and despair which Faulkner measures in the history of American south. For the Compson family, the family is less a tie of blood than a chain of guilt. Love in this family exists only as memory of childhood and its members stand for modern Americans suffering from a sense of loss and alienation. They have lost their faith in God and religion and it has resulted in the loss of spiritual vitality. They have lost their sense of good and evil and that's why they represent anxiety, ennui, despair, neurosis, boredom, mental vacuity, emotional barrenness and materialism. They are either nihilists like Mr. Compson, neurotics like Mrs. Compson, idiots like Benjy, promiscuous like Caddy, materialists like Jason or like Quentin they are so weak that they can't tolerate the burden of the surroundings and ultimately commit suicide.

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