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A Failure to Oscillate: Order and Chaos in Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*

It is said that William Faulkner referred to his 4th novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, as his “most splendid failure”. Of course, a writer is often their own harshest critic, and so we might disregard Faulkner's comment as excessive humility. On the other hand, his comment may be interpreted differently: It could be that Faulkner's oxymoronic appraisal is based on his novel's ambitious attempt to reconcile the intimate, subjective lense through which we may experience the lives of the novel's Compsons with the objectively tragic decline of a once-great family. Throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, we see a reciprocal relationship between the novel's structure (language and form) and its subject matter. The novels employment of deconstructive viewpoints reveals the unique failure of each Compson brother to independently reconcile order with chaos, or, more concretely, their inner discourse with the passage of time. Indeed, only the family's black servant, Dilsey, that is able to weather the tragic collapse of the family, demonstrating her ability to oscillate between order and chaos, a result of Dilsey's being at peace with time.

Faulkner's story is largely recounted through the points of view of the three Compson brothers: Benjy, Quentin and Jason. Their nihilistic father is plagued by alcoholism (to which he eventually succumbs) and their mother is so self-obsessed that she can scarcely handle her own emotions, let alone those of her children. As a result, the family's long-time servant, Dilsey, is essentially tasked with raising and caring for the Compson brothers and their sister, Caddie.

Benjy is born without the ability to think conceptually, and so after Quentin commits suicide and the “dipsomaniac” Mr. Compson dies, Jason is left as the head of the household. As Jason slowly steals from his family, the Compsons’ last days are ushered in; it has become clear that the Compson line has reached its final generation. In order to understand the ways in which the Compson brothers have failed to mentally reconcile with the passing of time, we must first turn to Ferdinand de Saussure, and then to Jacques Derrida, such that we might understand the relationship between the language of each section and its relationship to the failure of the Compson brother that narrates it.

Structuralism, as a literary paradigm, is predicated on the idea that the word for a concept is assigned in a purely arbitrary fashion; that is, words and their meanings exhibit artificial (as opposed to essential) connections. Saussure's structuralist argument, originally formulated in his essay “Nature of the Linguistic Sign”, asserts that all meaning is, at base, arbitrary, and therefore all (meaning as conveyed through) language must be contingent and based on mutually reinforcing meanings: “A particular word is like the center of a constellation” (Saussure 502). This idea of mutually reinforced meaning is the basis for most structuralist arguments. Indeed, Saussure holds that “in a language-state everything is based on relations” (Saussure 500). Of course, there are some words that hold a special place in our language, constituting the center of these web-based meaning structures whilst managing to escape the structurality that they support. In our case, this ‘central term’ is time.

To understand why time, on the one hand, is so important that it be considered (as it often is) as fundamental, and, on the other hand, inherently indefinable, we must turn to Derrida, the ostensible pioneer of post-structuralism. Derrida points out an unfortunate oversight of

structuralists like Saussure: the center of any structure escapes structurality itself, and, more importantly, can be substituted quite arbitrarily with another center (or 'central term') in the same way that any given word might be substituted for another (Derrida 533). For Derrida, the 'central term' is paradoxical, caught up in an inescapable duality of being centrally internal and external.

Of course, time tends to be so important to the way we think¹ that we can hardly go on without it. Yet, to deny temporality as central is to substitute its opposite, the eternal, as a new 'central term'. Derrida suggests that, in order to escape the structurality of structure, one must use current language (which reaffirms the center) to deny the indomitable center in new ways, thereby using the old (order) to inform the new (chaos), letting neither the center nor its negation become one's master (Derrida 542).

Both Quentin and Jason, the only brothers capable of passing on the Compson name, fail to oscillate between temporality (which includes tradition and past wealth) and its disturbing, incomprehensible negation: the eternal. As for Benjy, his ability to deliberately oscillate has some obvious obstacles, namely his mental retardation. Unable to understand the world conceptually, Benjy has failed to reconcile with time insofar as he has never been given the chance to hold time conceptually. However, Benjy's section (April 6th, 1928) demonstrates an interesting relationship with its subject matter. Benjy has no conceptual center, and so we are forced to reconcile the objective, non-aware character of Benjy's narration with a non-structural narrative. Much to Derrida's ostensible delight, *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the

¹ Immanuel Kant held time as an *a priori* category of thought; that is, inescapable, or rather essential to being.

inadequacy of time as the 'center' of structure. But what of Jason and Quentin, who not only have their own relationships with time, but also their own internal discourses?

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his essay "The Topic of the Speaking Person", writes that "The ideological becoming of a human being...is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (Bakhtin 354). This is immensely important when analyzing the relationship between Quentin and Jason's sections and their respective subject matters. We see that Quentin and Jason both fail to reconcile their own beliefs with the inevitable passage of time, and that the words of their father, Jason Compson III, are largely to blame (though in two distinct ways).

In Quentin's section (June 2nd, 1910), we see a relationship between the form of the section and Quentin's mental state. As the chapter proceeds, Quentin becomes more and more disoriented, and with this disorientation comes a reciprocal devolution in form. The chapter starts with traditional formatting and grammar, as Quentin recalls what his father told him as he gave him his Grandfather's watch: "I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire...I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it" (Faulkner 76). Quentin's attempt to physically destroy the watch indicates the manor in which time haunts him, and the devolution of Quentin's language by the end of the chapter confirms that he has been unable to reconcile his father's words with his own idealism (Faulkner 80). As a result, Quentin's language, along with his mind, descends into chaos, slipping the surly bonds of grammar and syntax: "it wont do any good dont you know it wont let me go" (Faulkner 154). In a tragic turn of events, the watch eventually drives Quentin to suicide as he is unable to "conquer" time (that is, to reconcile with

its passing and what that means for tradition and Caddie's virginity), choking on his last breaths in an attempt to remove himself from time completely.

As for Jason, the issue is essentially the converse: Jason's section displays an unnerving lucidity, and starts and ends with the same phrase: "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say". Juxtaposed with Quentin's ideological transition, Jason's section is largely circular, and demonstrates that same self-absorption as Jason's mother. Bakhtin asserts that "An independent, responsible and active discourse is the fundamental indicator of an ethical, legal, and political human being" (Bakhtin 358-359). Jason is so stubborn in his beliefs about woman that he is unable to lead a household or find a mate. Jason does not deal with his father's nihilism like Quentin: Jason ignores his father's conviction that "no battle is ever won, it is the illusion of philosophers and fools" (Faulkner 76). Jason desperately tries (and fails) to reconcile with the fact that time, and its unfair consequences, cannot be undone. Thus we see that Jason and Quentin have both failed to mediate their inner beliefs with their familial, authoritative discourse, which Bakhtin most appropriately refers to as "the word of the fathers" (Bakhtin 355).

Let us turn, then, to the pious Dilsey, who features prominently in the last section. Dilsey is at peace with time, and therefore does not allow it to conquer her (it is Dilsey that must console Mrs. Compson when Dilsey's husband T.P. dies, demonstrating her acceptance of death as a consequence of time), nor does she allow it to force her into despondency or nihilism like it did with Mr. Compson. We learn from Derrida that (time as) center "is as readily called the origin as the end" (Derrida 531), and so we finally understand Dilsey's oscillatory competency (between the eternal and the temporal) when, upon learning that the Compson line has ended, Dilsey remarks: "I seed dae beginnin, en now I sees de endin", a subtle indicator of her

relationship with time (Faulkner 297). Perhaps this competence is the reason that, in the novel's appendix, Faulkner writes just two words under Dilsey's heading: "They endured" (343).