

Storytelling and Point-of-View in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

Telling a story, whether it be recounting the day of your grandmother's funeral or re-telling a story you have heard all your life, for example, the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is fundamental to human existence and the existence of human societies and cultures. Not a day goes by without the telling of stories—war stories, news stories, biographic stories, allegorical stories, children's bedtime stories, explanatory stories, amusing stories, horror stories, unbelievable stories, ridiculous stories, deceitful stories, love stories, historical stories, stories to teach something, stories to warn against something, stories to imbue moral values, stories reinterpreting other stories, stories that try to penetrate the mystery of human existence. (It is notable that in a recent work, Frederic Jameson takes the view that narrative may be a fundamental way of organizing the world. . . .) (Berman, p. 154)

The Sound and the Fury is first and foremost a story, a story about a particular southern family, the Compsons, during the early part of the twentieth century in America. How a story is told, however, is what sets one story apart from another. This is clearly one of the functions of the structure of *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner begins with one story and then tells it from four distinctly separate points-of-view. Point-of-view, then, is what structures the novel and navigates the reader's participation in the story. Yet, by using point-of-view to tell the story, Faulkner is revealing something else about the nature of storytelling: That a story, even when told by an innocent, can never be accepted at face value, that a story always has more than one point-of-view, that when evaluating a story we must always take into consideration who is telling the story and out of what traditions and motives the narrator is speaking, and to what purpose. Faulkner, by not choosing to begin his story with "Once upon a time" or "The day dawned bleak and chill" is demanding from his readers a fundamental shift in the way we read and analyze stories. He disallows passivity. We cannot be like Dilsey in the final section of the novel sitting among the congregation at church stirred and stupefied by a masterful preacher. Everything must be questioned, even the ancient stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

To tell his story of the Compson family, Faulkner takes us into the minds of three brothers, each with his own voice, each with his own perceptions or lack of them, and yet each a member of the same family and same society. To conclude the novel, or as many readers would agree, to prepare us to read the novel again, Faulkner tells the story once more, but this time he uses the familiar and more traditional third-person point-of-view.

We begin the novel in search of a story, in search of a familiar pattern, and instead are put into the mind of Benjy who has been “three for thirty years.” We are told the time, April 7, 1928, and from there are plummeted into a world that is immune to time, immune to almost everything except the loss of his sister Caddie. Benjy, the youngest Compson son, born an imbecile, does, however, introduce us to all the characters, although we can’t always figure out precisely who they are, how they relate to each other, and what they mean to the story. He also introduces us to the recurring images in the novel—Luster’s search for a lost quarter, damuddy’s funeral, the fence, the branch where the children play, Caddie’s wedding, his father’s funeral, his mother’s hypochondria, black servants, and a southern white family. However, until we finish each of the stories, the images appear random impressions without structure and meaning. Everything in Benjy’s world is impressionistic, thus the narrative movement from present to past, from one scene to another. Upon first reading, Benjy’s section keeps us just at the edge of bewilderment, wondering at every turn of the page and every name and pronoun, what the hell is going on?

If Benjy’s section keeps us bewildered, Quentin’s section keeps us opening and shutting doors. We are shown more details about the scenes and characters alluded to in Benjy’s section, but only as it concerns Quentin. Quentin’s story, too, appears to move randomly from present to past, from one scene to another; however, unlike Benjy, we sense that Quentin is a highly sensitive and intelligent young man who is deeply pained by the world that has supplanted his innocent childhood. But that does not make Quentin’s story easier to decipher. We are still confronted with images and scenes and dialogues that don’t quite make sense. Why is Quentin so obsessed with stopping time? Why is he upset by the advice of his father? Why does he confess that he has committed incest? Why his obsession

with the loss of virginity and what it means for men and women in society? Why is he constantly asking other males if they have a sister? Why does he remark that Christ was without a sister? Why does each moment in the present correspond to a moment from his past, especially as it relates to Caddie? Did he commit incest with Caddie or is it a fantasy he has conjured to keep Caddie for himself? Why is Quentin so distressed and disgusted by Caddie's marriage? Why has he determined to drown himself? It is the questions we as readers are forced to ask that help us piece together Quentin's narrative and help us to make connections and meaning.

If Benjy's section keeps us bewildered and Quentin's section floods us with questions, Jason's narrative tells us exactly what he thinks. "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say." Upon first reading, we are unaware of who is speaking and to whom he is referring. In fact, throughout the novel, certain names have caused confusion for the reader. Benjy's name was originally Maury, also the name of his maternal uncle. Jason is the name of the Compson patriarch and also the name of the second son. Quentin is the name of Caddie's brother and also the name Caddie bestows upon her daughter. Until we hear "I never had time to go to Harvard or drink myself to the ground," and until Jason names Quentin and accuses her of telling her grandmother lies, we could mistake Jason for his father and Quentin for her mother. (This is a recurring technique throughout the novel that keeps the reader from becoming passive, in addition to comparing and contrasting the generations and suggesting something about the nature of names and naming itself.) Once this is remedied, there is no mistaking Jason's voice. Everything and everyone in his life have conspired against him, especially women—"his sister, for failing to secure the job promised by her ex-husband; his niece, for scandalizing the family name through her public misbehavior; his mother, for refusing to grant him authority as head of the household; his father, for squandering the Compson patrimony on a pointless wedding and an equally pointless year's tuition at Harvard; his brother Quentin, for drowning himself and showing the town of Jefferson yet another way the Compson family is crazy; [his imbecile brother Benjy, for attacking a neighbor's daughter and having to be castrated]; his boss, for treating him like a common employee; and finally Jews, Yankees, and New Yorkers for cheating 'decent Americans'." (Matthews, p. 64) Jason sees the world as out to get him, as a personal indictment. Unlike Quentin who questioned the

racial and sexual attitudes of his society, Jason cannot see the outside influences that are responsible for much of his suffering. He is trapped, as was Quentin, in his own story and his own point-of-view. But, unlike Quentin who chooses to stop time, to commit the one act that stands outside the prescriptions of nature, society, culture and history, Jason will make whatever small changes are required to adapt and continue his self-persecuted and self-centered existence.

Throughout this essay I have tried to keep in mind what it was like to read *The Sound and the Fury* for the first time. I think it is fair to say that upon finishing Jason's section, the one consistently overwhelming theme that can be recognized from each character's point-of-view is the effect Caddie had on each of their lives. What little else a first-time reader is able to distinguish is limited to disjointed bits and pieces of repeated images, incidents and character traits, which is what makes the last section of the novel so vital. It ushers our confusion into some semblance of recognition and provokes us to read the novel again.

After seeing the Compson family through the eyes of Benjy, Quentin and Jason, the final story of the novel lets us observe the family from the outside, from the point-of-view of a third-person narrator. It begins two days after Jason's story, on Easter Sunday, April 8, 1928 and opens with a description of Dilsey as she emerges from her cabin on a bleak and chill morning. For the first time we are provided descriptive narrative that sets the story in place and time, and shows us what the characters look like. For the first time we see Dilsey and recognize her as the one constant, abiding force who has nursed and cooked and cleaned and mothered and disciplined and comforted and served the Compson family for two generations. For the first time we get to see the Compson house, "square, paintless and with its rotting portico," a vision that is described to us upon Dilsey, Benjy, Luster and Frony's return from church. "They reached the gate and entered. Immediately Ben began to whimper again, and for a while all of them looked up the drive at the square, paintless house with its rotting portico." (Faulkner, pa. 298) One of the most powerful techniques of making meaning is by comparison and contrast, especially if the reader is left to draw the conclusions. It is probably the dominant technique used throughout *The Sound and the Fury*. The constant juxtapositions of past and present, the differences among the

brothers' stories, the placement of a southern young man in a northern town, the comparison of a daughter to her mother, the behavior of a white family and a black family on Easter Sunday. On first reading, however, drawing conclusions and making meaning is difficult. We notice the comparisons, we see the contrast, but without being able to see the story as a whole, everything seems fragmented. It is only with the ending of the novel that we realize the opening of the novel begins with Benjy watching men play golf and that the reason for his moaning is because of men calling for their caddie.

We finish the novel only to realize that we must read it again, that each individual story only makes sense in light of each of the other stories, and that no one story can tell the whole story. "By the time we arrive at the last section of the novel we can appreciate an important effect on our reading experience: no story is ever exempt from the conditions that produce it. No narrative, no matter how impersonal and objective—ever manages to escape the set of cultural assumptions from which it takes its viewpoint, just as each of the first three sections have shown how certain personal and social preoccupations saturate each narrator and condition the story each can tell." (Matthews, p. 78) We never hear Caddie's story, or her Mother or Father's stories, or Caddie's daughter Quentin's story, or any of the black characters' stories. We only get to see their actions and hear about them from Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and the third-person narrator to make our evaluations.

The Sound and the Fury is a novel that tells the story about the decay of a southern family in the early part of the century in Jefferson, Mississippi. It shows a generation of children who grow up in a family where the economic and social structure has been turned upside down. It shows the response of individuals to change—to the death of their grandmother, to the erosion of the southern way of life, to the passage from childhood to sexual maturation and adulthood, to the changing roles of women and blacks in society, to the loss of Christianity for godless philosophies and psychologies. It tells all the stories ever written: man against nature, man against society, man against God and man against himself. But it tells it from a powerfully and distinctly Faulknerian point-of-view.

Notes

Berman, Art. *From the New Criticism to Deconstructionism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Matthews, John T. *The Sound and the Fury: Faulkner and the Lost Cause*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990.

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage International, 1984.