

## **Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*: A Few Big Ideas**

**Time:** How do the various narrators present time? How do they value it? To whom is past most important? Present? Future? How does the past directly—and then indirectly—influence present actions? Decisions? How important are clocks, watches, seasons, holidays, other ways of measuring time? Which elements on the timeline do you find most important? Which scenes do you best remember—and why?

**Place:** Describe the Compsons' place, how they acquired it, what kinds of stewards the various generations of Compsons have proved. As for the present family (Jason III, Caroline Bascomb, and their children), what do they value about this place? How can we tell? What about the servants who live and work here? What keeps the Compsons here, those who stay? Why must Quentin<sup>1</sup> and Caddy leave? Quentin<sup>2</sup>? Benjy?

What images particularly evoke this landscape and its special qualities? For us as readers, what is memorable about this place?

**Sin, retribution, redemption:** Since much of the action occurs over Easter weekend 1928, naturally we must address why Faulkner chose this time (like Dante in the *Commedia*). Who talks about sin and judgment? Why? How seriously do various characters regard sin and retribution? How do they define these terms? Where is God, and what roles do God, Jesus, institutional religion play in defining these terms and in demanding either justice or injustice? What sins (and retributions) do we witness in the course of this story? What redemption? Which characters seem most likely to achieve or most deserving of redemption? Are they redeemed? If so, what does that mean exactly? Why or why not? What is the role of forgiveness in this novel? How do characters suffer for others and for themselves? Cite two or three examples.

**Suffering and healing:** Who talks about suffering? Who actually suffers? How and why? Does the suffering lead to healing? Who heals? In what situations is healing impossible after suffering? Is there something like a trial and crucifixion? Is there something like a resurrection? Ultimately does any person's suffering matter to others? To us as readers? Does it matter to Faulkner?

**Traditional values, family, morality:** What traditional values do we observe at work in this novel? Which characters maintain them? Insist on them? And who does not? How does Faulkner present his own view of these characters' morality? Do those values (e.g., filial love, honesty, purity, honor, nobility, kindness, generosity, forgiveness) matter to the plot and its resolution? Who best represents tradition and family love and devotion? Why do you think so? Who fails utterly? How does Faulkner contrast various characters through their morality, their way of valuing or not valuing family members? How does

conversational diction reveal a character's morality? Ultimately, what does morality matter? Or family?

**Crossing boundaries:** Who crosses boundaries (social, political, geographical, class, racial, ethical, moral, and so forth)—and why? Are there penalties or rewards for doing so? Evidence?

**South vs. North (East):** Where do you see evidence of conflict, nominal or real, between South and North or East, between traditions, conventions, values of separate regions? How important are these conflicts? Why must Shreve come from Canada, not simply a Yankee state?

**Christ Before and After:** Let us assume the suffering Benjy represents one kind of Christ figure—after all, he turns 33 years old on Holy Saturday; he lives in a kind of hell through that day as we witness his anguish (moaning, bawling, drooling) yearning for Caddy to return to him every time he hears a golfer call “Caddie.” Virtually every other character judges and dismisses Benjy—even Luster becomes exasperated and addresses Benjy harshly. Then, on Easter Sunday, Dilsey takes Benjy to church with her, and we see a different Benjy, one “rapt” at the sounds and sights in worship. Has Benjy's suffering made a difference? Has he atoned for others' sins (atonement theology, alas)? Who dismisses Benjy's suffering? Who judges him? Who trusts and believes in him?

**Fire, Water, Purifying Elements:** Where does Faulkner use fire and water, in particular, to suggest need for or actual purification? Why?

**Nature, the Natural, the Unnatural:** What has happened to Nature between the Compson children's births and 1928? How do we know? How significant is it that to our understanding of the family's decline? What characters behave “true to their nature,” as the cliché goes? “True to the *Compson* nature”? Does that nature reflect human nature as rooted and mired in original sin, or is it innocent and pure till influenced by exterior evil? How do we know? Until recently, people often described a bastard child or one handicapped physically or mentally as “a natural,” but now we regard both as “unnatural.” Why? What seems natural among these people that seems unnatural to readers?

**Cruelty, greed, self-absorption:** Where do we see evidence of cruelty, greed, self-absorption, utter selfishness? How does that behavior affect other characters? Affect our view of the Compsons? How has such behavior contributed to the Compson clan's decline? Where do we see kindness, generosity, outreach and care for others? How does that behavior affect other characters? Affect our view of the Compsons?

**The Human Heart:** How does this novel address the issues Faulkner describes in his Nobel-Prize-acceptance speech? Be specific.

