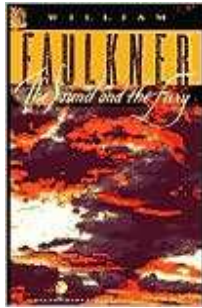




Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

The Sound and the Fury

by William Faulkner (1929, Random House)



Target audience: Readers who enjoy reading the classics and readers who enjoy reading about dysfunctional families.

Synopsis: The novel tells the story, from four different perspectives, of the disintegration of a Southern family. The father is cynical and passive, and though he clearly loves his children, he drinks himself to death; the invalid mother has no love for her children and continuously demands that she herself be taken care of. Benjy, the mentally retarded son of who his mother is ashamed, is castrated after he begins to exhibit sexual behavior. Quentin, the neurotic and romantic son, goes off to Harvard to fulfill his mother's lifelong wish and commits suicide there. Caddy, the only daughter, becomes pregnant while still a teenager and quickly marries a man who turns her out of his house when he discovers that their child is not his; Jason, his mother's favorite, loses his chance at a lucrative job when Caddy's marriage fails and is reduced to supporting the family by working in a general store. Caddy's daughter – named after her brother Quentin – is brought up in the unhappy Compson household although everyone is forbidden to speak her mother's name. She has her revenge upon her uncle Jason when she steals the \$7,000 he has amassed by embezzling from his mother and from funds sent to Quentin by Caddy. The family is supported and cared for by a family of black servants, led and held together by the matriarch Dilsey.

Author biography: Born in 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi, William Faulkner was the son of a family proud of their prominent role in the history of the south. He grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, and left high school at fifteen to work in his grandfather's bank.

Rejected by the U.S. military in 1915, he joined the Canadian flyers with the RAF, but was still in training when the war ended. Returning home, he studied at the University of Mississippi and visited Europe briefly in 1925.

His first poem was published in *The New Republic* in 1919. His first book of verse and early novels followed, but his major work began with the publication of ***The Sound and the Fury*** in 1929, *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *The Wild Palms* (1939) are the key works of his great creative period leading up to *Intruder in the Dust* (1948).

During the 1930s, he worked in Hollywood on film scripts, notably "The Blue Lamp," co-written with Raymond Chandler. William Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954 and the Pulitzer Prize for *The Reivers* just before his death in July 1962.

Reviews:

From Magill Book Review

The Compson family consists of Jason III and Caroline; their children, Quentin, Caddy, Jason IV, and Benjy; the black servants, Dilsey and her relatives; and eventually Caddy's illegitimate daughter, Quentin. By 1928, when most of the novel takes place, Jason III has drunk himself to death; his son Quentin has drowned himself; Caddy has married, divorced, and left her child with the family; and Jason IV rules the family. Between the children's earliest remembrance and 1928, the family has gone from domination by Caddy's special gift for loving to domination by Jason IV. Jason IV, who believes that Caddy's failed marriage to a banker has deprived him of success, revenges himself on her through her daughter. The novel has four sections and an appendix which tells what happened to Caddy after 1928. The first three sections are internal speeches by Benjy, Quentin (male), and Jason IV. The retarded Benjy, in his inarticulate but moving way, feels the loss of the only person who ever loved him, Caddy. On the day he commits suicide, Quentin shows that he is unable to accept Caddy's growing up. Jason reveals his petty paranoia on the day he finally drives Caddy's daughter away. With her departure, he loses further opportunity for vengeance and also loses his ill-gotten savings, which she has taken with her. In section four Dilsey and Benjy attend an Easter service. There Dilsey experiences the communion in love which the Compson family has lost. Because of this experience, she can continue loving this family despite its lovelessness.

Discussion questions:

1. The novel's title is taken from a monologue spoken by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who has attained the throne of Scotland through murder and has held it through the most brutal violence and tyranny; at this point in the play he has just heard that his wife has killed herself. Sated with his own corruption and looking forward to his imminent defeat and death, he says: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,/ To the last syllable of recorded time/ And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!/ Life's 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." Why do you think Faulkner chose a phrase from this passage for his title? How is this passage applicable to the novel? Do you find the novel as pessimistic and despairing as Macbeth's speech?

2. In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner makes use of the stream of consciousness technique, which was also used earlier in the 1920s in such experimental works as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. He further complicates matters for the reader by scrambling, as it were, the time frames referred to by the narrating consciousness of the opening section of the novel. How do you learn to find your way in Benjy's chapter? How many time periods are interspersed? What are some of the events Benjy is remembering? If Benjy is the "idiot" of Macbeth's speech, in what ways can he be seen, nonetheless, as both a sensitive and sentient observer of his family?

3. All of the novel's crucial events are registered in Benjy's section and are later recapitulated or expanded upon by other narrators, for Benjy is in many ways the central and most important narrating consciousness. Faulkner said of Benjy, "To that idiot, time was not a continuation, it was an instant, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow, it all is this moment, it all is [now] to him. He cannot distinguish between what was last year and what will be tomorrow, he doesn't know whether he dreamed it, or saw it." What are some of the effects of the opening section upon your experience of the Compson family story? Why would Faulkner choose Benjy to introduce the reader to his story? What is Benjy's importance in a novel that is dominated by memory rather than action?

4. Which characters, if any, serve as registers of emotional and moral value? In whom do we find love, honor, loyalty, strength? Is Jason the embodiment of the opposite traits? How does Caddy's daughter, Quentin, fit into the scheme of value here? What about Mrs. Compson? Do Benjy's perceptions function as a sort of touchstone for the reader?

5. Each of the four sections has a date rather than a chapter number. Note that three of the narratives take place on three sequential days in April of 1928 though they are not presented in chronological sequence. The second of the four, Quentin's narrative, is dated June 2, 1910 – the day he drowned himself at the end of his first year at Harvard. With each section the narrative voice becomes more coherent, and we finish with a fairly straightforward and traditional third-person voice. Why do you think Faulkner has chosen to present things in this way and in this order?

6. What are the reasons for Quentin's decision to drown himself? Why does Faulkner choose to have Quentin narrate his own section, even though he has been dead for nearly eighteen years? What do you see as the meaning of his dual obsession with his sister's virginity and the loss of the family honor? Why does he attempt to make, in a crucial conversation with his father, a false confession of incest? Given Quentin's state of mind at the time, what do you think of Mr. Compson's response to him?

7. For her brothers, Caddy is the traumatic absence at the center of their experience. For Faulkner, Caddy was the image around which the novel took shape; she was "the sister which I did not have and the daughter which I was to lose," and it all began with the image of "the muddy bottom of a little doomed girl climbing a blooming pear tree in April to look in the window" at the funeral of her grandmother. While Caddy is presented as maternal, erotic, promiscuous, and imperious, she is also unknowable, given that she can only be glimpsed in the rather unreliable narrations of her brothers. Does she appeal to you as a sympathetic character? Is Caddy's fall the cause of the family tragedy or is she just another child-victim of the abdication of parental responsibility? Why do Caddy's brothers each have a narrative voice, while Caddy has none?

8. Jason is an embittered young man with a nasty sense of humor. Nonetheless, he is the querulous Mrs. Compson's favorite, the son upon whom she depends. He imagines people saying of his siblings, "one of them is crazy and another one drowned himself and the other one was turned out into the street by her husband..." Do you think he succeeds in preserving the appearance of normality that is so important to him? How would you describe Jason's mode of thinking and reasoning? What are some of his activities and preoccupations? What is the effect of his narrative's mood and voice, following as it does upon Benjy's and Quentin's?

9. What role does Dilsey play in the novel? Why does the narrative of the fourth and final section focus upon her, and why do you think Faulkner chose not to give her a narrative in her own voice? What is the significance of the black community and its church in the final section? The novel ends on Easter Sunday; how does this turn to an overtly Christian context work for you as a reader?

10. The novel takes into its scope a number of serious philosophical and psychological issues – the meaning of time, for instance, and the psychopathology of the family – but it does not devote itself to a cohesive exploration of any of them. What, then, would you say this novel is "about"? Think again about the Macbeth quotation – life is "a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing." What does Faulkner's tale, told four times, signify? What does it achieve? In what ways does the novel focus our attention upon the problem of representing consciousness realistically within the novel form? How does ***The Sound and the Fury*** change or affect your experience as a reader of novels?

**Prepared by Lisa Hewel, Moffat Library of Washingtonville. June 2010
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**