

William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury": An Ethical and Moral Decline in the American South

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Abstract

"The Sound and the Fury" by William Faulkner recounts the American theme of loss and decline, especially, a moral and ethical decline in the South. It, actually, recounts the southern history of decline and loss. Faulkner himself was a victim of that loss which he artistically shows through the tale of the family of Compsons. The decline of the family ponders over the loss of Caddy's virginity and her later ill fated marriage to save her traditional family name. Each of the four stories of the novel is centered upon the loss of Caddy and her virginity. All the major characters of the novel lack seriousness of religious values and sentiments which cause spiritual crisis or moral loss among them. These losses of ethics and morals show the ways of the decline of the family. This breaking-down of the family, however, be met with on the observance day of Christ, that is, the day of the Easter Sunday when Christ resurrected himself for the welfare of humankind. So as a consequence Faulkner means that there still might be some expectancy. This paper aims at demonstrating how man is losing his moral sense and his action gives rise to perversion, thus, cutting him from the main stream of the society. It is to be proved that man is made of stern stuff and even though temporarily he may experience psychological perversion he cannot remain disjointed and can find a solution through ethics and morals. To establish my point I am largely indebted to the critical writings of Cleanth Brooks, Joel Williamson, Joseph Blotner, and so on. Besides I have carefully studied some scholarly articles to go through the subject.

Keywords: decline, ethics, loss, morality, spirituality

1. Introduction

In twentieth century America was in grip of facing the realities of life; a sharp departure from the sentiments and melodramas of the previous century. The First World War considerably diminished the elements of romance in the novels and consequently led to a realistic portrayal of life. Obviously this gave rise to certain questions, that is, the ethics that should govern men, since now there was a change in the attitude of writers towards human nature. America and Americans faced a situation which was almost anarchical. It is, in this light, that William Faulkner appeared with a moral approach to life. His novels reveal murder, rape, incest, tribal violence, guilt and suicide that existed in American life, but William Faulkner advocated a moral view where he seems to advocate the "Second Coming". Thus, here the stress will be to demonstrate and reveal his moral approach to life through his writings. William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury" is regarded as one of the most important American contribution to the fictions of high modernism. It has generated a number of countless and critical noteworthy interpretations. When Faulkner wrote the novel, he felt a creative urge that he was never to let slip from the mind. The novel bases American Civil War (1861-1865), fought between the North and the South and the ultimate winning of the North over the South. What was striking in this war the South collapsed largely which is yet to be repaired. This novel reproduces the Civil War era and its subsequent results which were seen largely in the later period. He portrays a bulky changed condition of the South, which it never saw before the war. As the economy of the South was based on agriculture and, as a result of the war, slavery abolished, the southern aristocracy was destroyed completely. This downfall led the South towards ethical decline, frustration, imbalance and loss of

faith; which existed till the first-half of the twentieth century. This paper aims at demonstrating how man is losing his moral sense and his action gives rise to perversion, thus, cutting him from the main stream of the society. It is to be proved that man is made of stern stuff and even though temporarily he may experience psychological perversion he cannot remain disjointed and can find a solution through ethics and morals.

To do my work suitably I have surveyed some major critical works and some scholarly articles relating to the novel. Cleanth Brooks in his "William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County" discusses 'Yoknapatawpha' as an imagined community whose genealogical history becomes the subjects of the novels. I have enriched my knowledge of the southern history after reading "William Faulkner and Southern History" by Joel Williamson. And one book I should mention in this respect "William Faulkner: A Biography" by Joseph Blotner. This one helps a lot to get the information about the personal history of William Faulkner and the contemporary age as well. Faulkner himself belonged to an aristocratic family, which collapsed as a result of the Civil War. After losing the superior status of the society his family also became poor- poor not only in respect of riches but in the issues of ethics also. This work almost differs from the rests which have been done before. The reading of scholarly papers and online sources has also given me useful information to write in respect of ethical and moral issues of the writing of Faulkner.

The methods in which way I will prove my research problem consist of close reading, interpreting and in depth analysis of the sources. I will also support my study with a significant number of critical writings which deal with the subject of morality. My approach will be interdisciplinary and will consult some of the matters to understand the inter-

connectedness of morality, good, humanity and spirituality. Further, it is intended to consult major works of the period concerned through libraries as well as collect primary and secondary sources through internet and libraries.

The present novel narrates the tale from four different angles of the disintegration and declination of an American southern family. Though the father of this family loves all his children earnestly, he is inadvertent and swallows up himself to death. The infirm mother is neither passionate to her children nor love them as a mother does. She only nourishes her son Jason with whom she finds something like herself. In spite of her indulgence to her children she rather demands frequently that she herself should be taken care of. She is ashamed of her mentally retarded son Benjy as he exhibits his sexual behavior. To please his mother's wish Quentin, the neurotic and romantic son moves to Harvard and there he lastly commits suicide. The only daughter of the family, that is, Caddy, becoming pregnant still in a tender age, marries a man without delay. But when the man discovered the child not of his own, he drives away her from the house. As a consequence, Jason, the loving child of his mother disposes of his luck, and is mostly obliged to supporting the family, though each of the members of the family is prohibited to work in a general store. Caddy's daughter- named after her sibling is brought up to speak her mother's name. She delivers her retribution upon her uncle Jason by stealing the money \$7000 which he seized from his mother and from assets sent to Quentin by Caddy.

The experimental style of the novel "The Sound and the Fury" shows a great challenge for the readers. At that time Faulkner had almost given up hopes that a publisher or a reviewer would be agreed to publish the book. Most of the critics are of the opinions that Faulkner wrote this novel on the whole purpose of himself and not for others. The conventional aspects of the novel like exposition, plot, and character advancement are thrown away so as to feature the story structure that could speak to the substances of mental turmoil, the smoothness of time and memory, and the difficult joining of independent selves in family life. Faulkner's materials may seem so unfledged as to be scarcely containable inside language by any means. The novel achieves statures and profundities of articulation that are genuinely stunning: it is a remarkable work that luxuriously compensates the reader's endeavors.

Faulkner's novel recounts the American theme of loss and decline, especially, an ethical and moral decline in the South mostly during the Civil War period. As earlier said, Faulkner himself was a victim of that loss which he artistically shows through the tale of the Compson family. The decline of the family ponders over the loss of Caddy's virginity and her later ill-fated marriage to save her traditional family name. Each of the four stories of the novel is centered upon the loss of Caddy and her virginity. All the major characters of the novel lack seriousness of religious values and sentiments which cause spiritual crisis or absence among them. These losses of morality, religiosity and ethics show the ways of the decline of the family. Dilsey, an African descent maid servant of the Compson family only differs from the members of the Compson family. She is an absolute devotee of Christianity, who everyday attends church to surrender herself to God. She is totally a contrasting character who stands apart from their masters' faith and values. All the members of the white family are, thus, largely dependent on her though she is out

and out a woman of black origin. Among all the characters of the novel Dilsey is only character who has been portrayed by Faulkner as a prospect of the family.

The title of the novel "The Sound and the Fury" is mainly based on Shakespeare's play "The Tragedy of Macbeth" where Macbeth utters his last soliloquy speech in Act V, Scene V to show meaninglessness of life after getting the news of Lady Macbeth's death and realizing the fact that his empire is going to an end. Indeed like Shakespeare's Macbeth; Faulkner's tale begins by an idiot Benjy, who, because of his idiocy and retardation, does not add judgment to his perceptions and is a pure register of a series of impressions. One of the most significant of his impressions is that Caddy smelt like trees- a reference to the time she gave herself to Dalton Ames, ruins her purity and gets herself pregnant-signifying decay of the Compson family. Here the reference of the watch which Quentin was given by his father is noted for being the mausoleum of his hopes and desires as well, and this introduces the tone of the novel vehemently.

The theme and tone of spiritual failure and moral decline without redemption or a ray of hope is a characteristic that commences each of the four narratives and the final sign of the loss that follows the loss of Caddy's purity. Though contrastingly in Dilsey's some rays of hopes are found which her religion as well as belief gets to her - as she says that she saw the beginning of the family and now she sees the ending of it. What is important in Dilsey's character, among all the characters she is only one who is probably going to save the old values, namely; Christian faith, hard work, honor of the South without the defilement of self-retention. Significantly Faulkner presents her as the protagonist of his novel. Though she is only a maid servant of the family and bears no blood relation yet through her character Faulkner only hints at salvation for the South. It is Dilsey's Christianity which grounds her and enables her to comprehend her general surroundings just as to keep up her mental stability which the insane Quentin and the hypochondriac Jason are not possessing.

The novelist shows the loss of ethics and morals through almost all the characters of the family: Jason III, the father figure is an alcoholic; Caroline, the mother figure is a self-obsessed hypochondriac; Benjy is severely mentally retarded; Caddy is dishonored; Quentin is suicidal and psychotic and Jason IV is greedy and neurotic. The Compson family line apparently ends silently, as Jason shows himself as an incapable to have any legitimate child. Quentin who suffers from psychosis is convinced that he has committed incest with Caddy because he is so absorbed in the name of the Compson family he imagines if the act of sexual invasion were committed by himself the Compson name would be intact and there would be none of the loss of it that goes with the loss of Caddy. If it is seen contrastingly Jason is in no psychosis in comparison with the psychosis of Quentin because of the damaged notions of the family honor- he is embittered that he lost the bank job that was promised to him by Herbert Head because of Caddy's divorce from him and the subsequent theft of his money by Miss Quentin, Caddy's daughter. Jason spends much of his life blaming others for his own failures and playing the victim and mean to others. This man is also obsessed with the loss of Caddy as he was promised by Herbert Head to get the job at bank. When he gets the news that Miss Quentin has escaped with his money, he had nothing to do

that time only being frustrated. Dilsey's sense of ethics and morality is in contrast to the neurosis of Jason and the psychosis of Quentin. Dilsey's sense is originated from her faith and activities in religion. In the novel she is only a fortunate figure who has hopes and dreams as she has withheld the southern values of the original Compsons – charity, family, and religious faith – without the vitiation of self-obsession. The irony of the present novel lies in the very character of Dilsey who in spite of being a black maid servant belonging to the lower classes of society is now a representative of all the rays of hopes for a conservative white family and the values derived from slave ownership. This scene witnesses that the members of the Compson family remember the Easter Sunday because on this very day Gibsons are accused of leaving and not making them dinner. The family talks about Christianity, but it never arranges religious ceremonies or goes to church as Miss Quentin sleeps long in Sundays. After Caddy it is the black servant who treats or takes care of Benjy as a genuine man, rather than an embarrassment. The family line ends when Miss Quentin escapes and all that remains in a ruinous state, that is a man possessing mental-retardation and a crucial, wifeless clerk who is incapable of loving and so there is no least possibilities of his legitimate children. The famous Compsons collapse 'not with a bang, but a whimper'. This breaking-down of the family be met with on the observance day of Christ when He resurrected himself for the welfare of humankind so as a consequence Faulkner means that there still might be some expectancy.

2. References

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