

The Circular Narrative Structure of *The Sound and the Fury*

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Narrative structure decides how a story is developed and helps deepen the reader's appreciation and understanding of the story. William Faulkner experimented with the circular narrative in his stream-of-consciousness novel *The Sound and the Fury* to represent the ups and downs of the Compson family, and the disintegrated world in the South as well. This paper aims to study the unique narrative structure of the novel. It analyzes the four sections which are independent of but mirror each other, discloses the fact that the seemingly irrelevant sections are strung together by the absent character Caddy, and displays Faulkner's remarkable narrative art which throws the reader abruptly into the narrations of the same story, each time from a new angle, thus making the story incomplete and unfinished, with its conclusion in a permanent suspension.

Keywords: *The Sound and the Fury*, circular narrative, mirroring narrations, absent central character

Introduction

As a book remarkable for its intricate contrapuntal design, *The Sound and the Fury* published by William Faulkner in 1929 has won wide recognition. Conrad Aiken, for example, spoke highly of it:

...This, with its massive four-part symphonic structure, is perhaps the most beautifully wrought of the whole series, and an indubitable masterpiece of what James loved to call the "fictive art." The joinery is flawless in its intricacy; it is a novelist's novel—a whole textbook on the craft of fiction in itself... (1966, p. 51)

Actually, this is a four-times-told tale narrated from different points of view. The first three sections are the interior monologues of the three Compson sons, revealing different hermetic subjective worlds; and the fourth section is narrated by the omniscient author, though restricted within the vision of the black servant Dilsey, depicting an open objective world. According to some critics, none of the four tales speaks to another; each imagined order cancels out the one that precedes it. The reader, in a welter of contradictory visions, can only find "a discontinuous unorganized middle that lacks the beginning and end of novel-time" (Kartiganer, 1988, p. 23). However, a careful examination will lead to a widely divergent conclusion, as suggested by Conrad Aiken before that the novel shows Faulkner's ingenuity in its delicate joinery. The four independent centers of consciousness are connected by the absent figure in the novel, the Compson daughter Caddy, who remains the focus of the four accounts. If the four separate and self-closed worlds can be taken as the beads, then Caddy is the string that links them together, thus completing the circular narrative structure of the novel.

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An Idiot's Narration: The Dumbshow of Agony

The novel opens with a date and the disorder of an idiot's mind, which is different from the normal beginning of a novel. There is no introduction to setting, time, characters, or any other apparently necessary element. Speech seems to be not important at all; the reader is plunged into the silent stream of inner life. As Faulkner put it that, Benjy is as less a character than a way of seeing grief. "He no longer had Caddy; being an idiot he was not even aware that Caddy was missing. He knew only that something was wrong, which left a vacuum in which he grieved. He tried to fill that vacuum" (Matthews, 1988, p. 79). Beginning with Benjy, each narrator broods on how to "fill that vacuum".

As an infant-man whose idiocy is the formal arrest of childhood, Benjy can produce sound but cannot mark it; the only expression of moaning and bellowing places him eternally on the threshold of speech. Without knowing the more consoling but dangerous power of utterance, his special articulation constitutes the dumbshow of his agony.

According to Bergson, "the primary activity of the mind as it encounters pure duration is to spatialize" (Matthews, 1988, p. 80). Since his sister's disappearance 18 years ago, Benjy has remained in a fallen world of loss, memory, time, and grief, and been surrounded by signs of Caddy. Failing to solidify his impressions and express them in language, Benjy does spatialize the loss of Caddy. Once Caddy has vanished, Benjy's constrained memory cannot distinctly recall her; the formal equivalent of his links to reminders of his sister is his physical confinement such as the Compson grounds, the garden gate, the fence along the pasture, the "graveyard" on the lawn, and so on. Physical location must serve in the innocent mind for representations of an idea, image, or word. Every area of his domain opens immediate access to all of the moments that have occurred there. His going through the broken place in the fence with Luster in 1928, for example, is to emerge with Caddy 20 years earlier.

The more obvious spatialization is his hoarding relics of Caddy, the slipper, the fire, the spot where the mirror once hung, the smell of trees, the jimson weed in the bottle, and so on, as things whose presence partially fills the void left by Caddy. Rousseau imagines drawing as the intrusion of gesture into the immediacy of love, and it constitutes speaking primal articulation—"an effort to signify *within* the movement of full pleasure and presence" (Matthews, 1988, p. 81). Derrida emphasizes in recapitulating Rousseau that the image traced at the tip of the wand is "an image that is not completely separated from the person it represents...[and] is very close to being the other *itself*, close by a minute difference" (Matthews, 1988, p. 82). Similarly, Benjy's clinging to some of the objects in his collection is precisely his way of articulation for they are just barely separated from the body of the beloved.

Once Benjy commits himself to filling the vacuum, he has identified Caddy with the difference of signs. But as Derrida put it, "that small difference—visibility, spacing, death—is undoubtedly the origin of the sign and the breaking of immediacy" (Matthews, 1988, p. 82). Therefore the objects cannot substitute fully for Caddy nor reappropriate her presence. They derive meaning only as they embody Caddy as already dying from the plenitude of full presence. When Benjy reaches into the fire which "contains" Caddy to regain her, he burns his hand in its alien, destructive difference. And when Caddy enters into the mirror in Benjy's eyes, she is actually doing so to flee the mirror herself or to drag another out of it. So memory, speech, and desire depend on the unavailability of their object. Benjy's memories of Caddy simply embody the paradox since they cannot represent her except as she begins to disappear.

A Suicide's Account: Refusal of Speech

Benjy's rudimentary intelligence leaves him on the threshold of expression, groping innocently to "fill that vacuum" of Caddy's loss with mute speech. His eldest brother, Quentin, the Harvard student, instead has perfect license to engage his formidable memory, imagination, and eloquence in the task of articulating a response to loss. However, Quentin deeply distrusts words and does avoid words because he senses that they displace and substitute, and he also recognizes the danger of words: They seek to recover what their very existence proclaims no longer self-sufficient. Thus silence guards Quentin's concentration on the lost Caddy and becomes a sign of his evading the reality of Caddy's absolute absence.

He recognizes his voice as a weapon that he holds only haltingly and wishfully: "Quentin has shot Herbert he shot his voice through the floor of Caddy's room" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 104). He remembers his voice as a threat to intimacy with Caddy for she once asked him to pronounce Dalton Ames's name and to feel her pulse quicken. He is afraid of the intrusion of the voice that may destroy presence: "the voice that breathed o'er eden clothes [for a bride] upon the bed..." (Faulkner, 1995, p. 104). That's why he "was to isolate her [Caddy] out of the loud world" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 176) into a hell of his own making.

Quentin's refusal to speak and his horror at the voice simply ensure his imprisonment in the memory of the "dead" Caddy. He seeks desperately to devote his memory to neutralizing Caddy's loss by occupying himself solely with memories of her. The events of his last day subtly replicate features of his loss of Caddy, as if every present moment is a repetition of the original dispossession. His effort to restore the little Italian sister to her home and his vain assault on the crowing Gerald Bland certainly figure Quentin's childhood attempts to reclaim Caddy and to fight off Dalton Ames and Herbert Heads. Yet it may be discovered that Quentin's memory necessarily disfigures, corrects, and structures the past so as to satisfy an underlying ambivalence: He longs for the recovery of the plenitude, unity, and innocence of Caddy at the same time when he confronts the fact that to remember Caddy is to insist on her absence or death. As in Benjy's case, Caddy can only be remembered as the presence that has already begun to vanish.

Feeling the threat of voice to destroy the presence, Quentin adopts silence as his articulation. Similarly, sensing that his memory is incapable of reappropriating the lost Caddy, and fearing that time will undermine memory itself, Quentin chooses suicide to escape from the cruel reality and from time. His suicide is really a creative gesture that helps him erect an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind remains everlasting, and the present will never extinguish the possibility of remembering the past. Yet on the other hand, what is more crucial in Quentin's section or in the whole novel is that his suicide expresses a refusal to accept the conditions and consequences of filling the vacuum. All of his efforts in recovering Caddy's presence are in vain. Memory, speech, and desire may be activated only by a sense of loss that can never know original possession.

A Paranoiac's Story: Impotent Articulation

Benjy and Quentin are doomed to reappropriate nothing except Caddy as already disappearing; she is already an "origin" in their sections, and her absolute plenitude can never be evoked in their minds. A permutation of their pattern carries us into Jason's section, for he has apparently satisfied himself with an elaborate financial compensation for the inaccessibility of Caddy. As the sole sane figure of the family ironically, Jason seems to stay at the approximately preconscious level which is different from the unconscious or subconscious area of his brothers. Yet at the same time, he is at the furthest stage of paranoia and suffers

from a chronic headache; his thinking “is a logical justification of illogical desires and acts” (Liu, 1998, p. 133). Thus his world is not so frank and open as those of Benjy and Quentin.

Unlike his brothers who are unable to or refuse to speak, he seems to enjoy articulation in response to loss. But the only language he can risk is the stream of impotent insults he inflicts on everything around him. On the one hand, he considers himself an effective operator, family head, brainy swindler of Caddy and her daughter, a man of keen business sense, and throws invective to the others at will. “I haven’t got much pride, I can’t afford it with a kitchenful of niggers to feed and robbing the state asylum of its star freshman...” (Faulkner, 1995, p. 230). On the other hand, he views himself as the victim of the world and nurtures his suffering at the hands of the Compsons, his boss Earl, the telegraph company and particularly Caddy. He takes revenge on Caddy by inflicting persistent verbal torture on her daughter Quentin: “Everybody in this town knows what you are... and I’m not going to have any member of my family going on like a nigger wench” (Faulkner, 1995, p. 188). “Like I say once a bitch always a bitch” (Faulkner, 1995, p. 264).

Yet still the predicament of loss and articulation governs the dilemma of Jason. Failing to trace the origin of his agony, he turns to the hateful speech for comfort. But it proves a failure again, for his furious and malicious curses do not bring him pleasure but put him in an uproarious chaos and incessant frustration. Furthermore, it not only highlights Caddy’s absence but also results in the loss of his scapegoat for Caddy too: her daughter Quentin flees with his hoard of 15 years of theft. Speech is found to only initiate repeated losses, instead of recovering the thing itself.

A Witness’s Narrative: Objective But Powerless Description

The unresolvable contradictions of each brother’s vision ripen in the last section into the rich paradoxes. The novel moves here outward, away from the sealed monologues of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, into the objective narrative though from the limited viewpoint of the black servant Dilsey. The telling of the Compson story from within passes to the telling from without. For the first time in the book we get authorial description, and for the first time, we hear a “real” voice, stepping out from the voicelessness of the stream of consciousness. It is a rhetorical voice that attempts to describe the sufferings of the Compsons from the loss of Caddy from a detached external viewpoint. The paradox is that the objective voice offers us an orderly, consistent portrait of the Compson family; yet the clarity is still lacking. The interpretations of Jason and Benjy seem pale and inadequate beside their respective monologues. Language appears to be powerless here. More importantly, Caddy’s absolute absence is confirmed by the refined articulation. Benjy’s misery bellowing, Jason’s futile pursuit of his niece, and the girl Quentin’s fall, all signify the permanent loss of Caddy. It’s because every spoken word speaks for another—destroying and creating presence, invading immediacy. So Quentin’s horror of speech can be understood.

Conclusion

The novel, as it approaches its cessation, discloses that articulation can never “fill the vacuum”, but only create it within, and that it can never successfully convert the original image of Caddy into a finished story. The Compson narrators, staying at different levels of consciousness, seem to have a very different story: Benjy loses love and tenderness, orderliness and security; Quentin loses his emotional anchorage and his ideals; Jason loses nothing but financial profit and an opportunity in a bank. The narrator in Section 4, as a witness other than a participant, tells about the decline and agony of the family somewhat resulting from the loss of Caddy or her

virginity. In fact, Caddy's absence generates a peculiar "language" or a gesture in the various narratives and seeks to reconstitute for her lost presence. Therefore, Caddy, the visible but untouchable "string" through the glass beads, helps to form the circular narrative structure of the novel. It is hard to identify the beginning or end of the story, since our entering into one center of consciousness and stopping at another are both so abrupt that we suspect it's simply a deliberate design for a special effect. That is, an effect of incompleteness. Swerving the novel away from resolution and completion, William Faulkner succeeds in prolonging its life. The headlong and disorderly abundance and the apparent shapelessness endow his novel with more possibilities and thus make it a body full of vitality.

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