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THE DECADENCE AND DECAY OF THE FAMILY IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

Nidhi Mehta, *Research Scholar, Department of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra*

Abstract:

The Sound and the Fury is one of William Faulkner's greatest novel and contributions to literature. It revolves around the Compson family belonging to the Southern aristocracy, and portrays its decline in terms of reputation, fortune, and morality over a period of time. The putrefaction of the family is manifested physically as well as mentally through various characters most of whom either have a specific vice or some physical or mental inabilities. Every Compson, in his or her own peculiar way, contributes to the family's decadence. The tragic degradation of the family is actually symbolic of the decline of the South in the postbellum period. Faulkner illustrates how the values that were once considered essential for holding a family together crumbled rapidly in the newly emancipated South and how the local community despite despite resisting desperately, could not stop the onslaught of modernity. Although the novel depicts a gloomy account of the dissolution of the once prosperous Compson family, Faulkner offers a sense of optimism through the character of Dilsey, who faces all ordeals with fortitude.

Keywords: *Family, decay, south, decadence, morality, southern aristocracy.*

The Sound and the Fury is often considered one of William Faulkner's finest novels and greatest contributions to literature because of its experimental structure. The recurrent time shifts, multiple narrators, unusual punctuation and syntax along with the use of stream-of-consciousness technique to demonstrate the inner reflections of characters make this work extremely influential and powerful. The novel revolves around the Compson family belonging to the Southern aristocracy, and portrays its decay and decadence in terms of reputation, fortune, and morality over a period of time. The putrefaction of the family is manifested physically as well as mentally, through various characters most of whom either have a specific vice or some physical or mental inabilities. Through the degeneration of the Compson family that was once known for a long line of decent men full of honour and pride, Faulkner demonstrates the chaotic and debauched state of the South in the postbellum period. "The decline of the southern family in *The Sound and the Fury* becomes, through Faulkner's resonant use of symbol, and particularly through his exploration of the theme of time and elaborate experimental use of time structurally, an account of 20th-century unease and sense of disintegration, an exploration of the modern consciousness" (Schellinger 1242).

The Compson family comprises Mr. Jason and Mrs. Caroline Compson and their four children Quentin, Caddy, Jason IV, and Benjy. Each member shows obvious signs of degeneracy and each one of them, in his or her own peculiar way, contributes to the family's decadence and destruction with the alcoholic father being burdened by the weight of traditions and the self-obsessed hypochondriac mother being a non-functioning ailing Southern lady largely unavailable to her children. Mr Compson's passiveness and Mrs Compson's neurosis make for a severely dysfunctional or psychotic family. The children do not share a secure relationship with their parents and that insecurity is glaringly exhibited in their attitude and behaviour too. Quentin, for instance, is obsessed with the idea of family honour, whereas Caddy becomes promiscuous. Benjy being a retard lives in his own timeless world and the vengeful Jason remains incapable of love. The siblings also have unusual equations among each otherBenjy depends too

heavily on his sister Caddy, while Jason is distant and shares a purely materialistic relationship with her. Quentin, on the other hand, is extremely close to Caddy and his relationship with her has incestuous undertones. Caddy's licentiousness is exhibited in her daughter Miss Qunetin too. William H. Rueckert, therefore, observes:

> The characters are all trapped in this declining family; they are also often trapped in their own ontologies, as so many other Faulkner characters are. Faulkner, as a novelist, was not just interested in writing about family, or history, but was, like all novelists, concerned with character, with being, with the self, and particularly with destructive and generative being. (Raseckert39-40)

The novel mainly revolves around the relationship between Caddy and her three brothers who demonstrate conflicting and negative opinions about their sister. Faulkner does not allow Caddy to narrate from her own perspective. "Caddy's brothers project on her the identity they desire her to adopt, and each of the respective identities they construct fits their own unique needs and personalities . . ." (West 85). Caddy becomes the central character who represents rather magnifies Compsons' moral decay. "Benjy cannot control her; Quentin cannot control her; her father cares not to; Caddy herself seems to have both claimed her own body, in that she will do with it as she pleases, and surrendered it, in that she offers it without thinking to whoever desires it" (Ellerby 88-89). Caddy may also be viewed as a metaphor for the South while her ripening can be likened to the changing conditions of the South in the wake of the Civil War. Like Caddy, the Southern society too, as a result of losing the War, Reconstruction, industrialisation and socio-political upheavals, began to change; however this change brought with it dislocated sensibilities and declining social values. A matured Caddy brings much shame to the family with her sexual conduct. She becomes pregnant and marries in haste; disowned by her family, she is soon abandoned by her husband too because he finds out that Caddy's daughter is not his child.

Although Caddy's actions dent the reputation of the family, it is her wantonness that makes the Compsons conscious of and search for their own identity in terms of sex, sexuality, and gender. She therefore, becomes instrumental in not only providing an access into the troubled mind of each family member but also in showing the general attitude of male Compsons towards women which, in turn, explains why they find it especially difficult to deal with her promiscuity. It may be noted that, in particular, Quentin's views about women are severely unrealistic and outdated due to which, he remains the most anguished soul in the novel. "Quentin, like most Southern men, has been given no alternative way to understand women. He longs to define Caddy's identity for her, yet he cannot conceive of any identity other than that of the pious, angelic, and un-sexual version of womanhood his culture has provided him with, an unrealistic identity that Caddy obviously rejects" (West 89). Caddie, therefore, makes her family members conceive their own reality which was somehow connected with the notion of sex being a debasing force which may even lead to destruction. Benjamin S. West's rightly states:

> Caddy, through the course of the novel, becomes viewed by all of the males around her as a fallen woman, the reason for their family decline, but importantly, Faulkner creates Caddy as a symbol of their failed attitudes. The fall is not to be blamed on Caddy or any other female character (except perhaps by the misogynist, Jason); instead, the blame lies strictly on the attitudes towards women Faulkner portrays through the Compson brothers. (West 85-86)

Interestingly, Quentin is the only Compson who actually cares about how he and his family fare on the tests of Southern moral standards. His obsession with time and with the past, is the only representation of the Compson family's past glory. As per the traditional Southern ideals the men were supposed to be the saviour of family's honour by dint of chivalry and moral strength and women were expected to be the epitome of grace, purity and chastity. Though all the Compsons, except for Caddy, believe in these ideals, their allegiance to them, unlike Quentin, is only on the surface. In reality, they are concerned with their own petty issues more than anything else. Mr Compson's lofty talks of tradition come from his love of

philosophising whereas Mrs Compson's sole concern is her own pathetic situation. Among the children, Benjy is too incapable of understanding the concept of ideals and values; Caddy cares little about morality or living up to her surname and rather seeks happiness in self-indulgence. Jason's interest, on the other hand, lies in his own materialistic gains.

Thus, the Compsons are mere shadow of the Southern idealism and more of a mix of fancy and reality related to the grand old South. Quentin who has been brought up with the extravagant sense of dignity and family honour based on the stories rather than living examples of his father or uncle, is constantly haunted by the hollowness of the professed idealism. He develops an incestuous passion for his own sister. Troubled simultaneously by his unfulfilled incestuous love, Caddy's precocious sexuality, and his failure to protect the family's honour, he is taken over by an awful sense of despondency. The only penance that he can think of is taking the blame of his sister's transgression upon himself by saying that he has engaged in incest with her. This is obviously the result of Quentin's deranged mental state due to the emotional and idealistic clashes pestering his mind. Charles I. Glicksberg rightly observes:

> Neurologically obsessed by the idea of sin, he is caught between two conflicting forces: nostalgia for the past with its religious absolute and high ideals of honor and bitter hatred of the godless, nihilistic present. He broods painfully over the loss of Caddy's honor and grieves even more because there is nothing he can do about it. An idealist thrust into an amoral world, he sees no way out for him except suicide. He is distressed by the utter collapse of the traditional moral values and particularly by the manner in which the shining ideal of purity in woman is foully dragged in the mud. (Glicksberg 103)

Thus, utterly dejected by his own sister's misdemeanour, Quentin begins to suppose that Caddy's actions would cause lesser damage to the Southern moral code has she committed the sin with him. Quentin's obsession with the concept of virginity and Compson honour and his failed effort to convince his father that Caddy's unborn child is the result of incest leaves him with only one solution, that is, to end his life which in turn, contributes to the decline of the Compson family.

Benjy, the idiot, on the other hand, is the living representation of Compsons' degeneracy. Within the family, Benjy is looked upon more as a nuisance and a curse. He is incapable of expressing his emotions and speaking coherently. As he lacks analytical skills, he only reacts to sensation. His mental retardation is a cause of pain to his father Mr Compson and for Mrs Compson, Benjy is nothing but a punishment. For the brothers, he was just a nuisance. Ironically, however, he is the only Compson who remains closest to the truth about the family's decay. Benjy's character therefore, serves an important purpose of capturing the essential meaning of the novel symbolically. As Hugh Ruppersberg observes:

> Mental disorder has traditionally served in Southern literature as a signifier of social and cultural decay. In William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy Compson, described in the Appendix to that novel as a mongloid idiot, is incapable of speech, reason, or the ability to differentiate between past and present. He is the emblem of a once noble Southern family's decline, of the Old South's decay, of modernist horror. (Ruppersberg 32)

Since Benjy lives in "timeless present," he perceives reality as a set of ordered pattern through a string of flashbacks often initiated by images, actions and sensations. Caddy's fall seems to have the most intense effect on Benjy and although he gets perturbed by different disorders of different types, Caddy's deviation from the norm troubles him the most. Caddy's wearing of perfume agitates Benjy because she no longer smells "like trees," an olfactory sensation he has always associated Caddy with and so when she gives it away, it does pacify him for some time. However, Benjy is permanently damaged when Caddy gets involved with Dalton Ames and the smell of trees wears out forever. Notably, Benjy here symbolises those disillusioned Southerners who experienced a sense of loss for their beloved South and found it hard to cope with the inescapable change. Just as Benjy's restricted emotional and mental growth makes him incapable to communicate his sadness over his loss, the Southerners also could not articulate their deep sense of gloom over the loss of purity and inevitability of change.

Benjy's sense of loss is further aggravated by the physical loss of his testicles. His unintentional assault on a local young girl during one of his fits gets him forcibly castrated. It may be noted that Benjy's crying over his missing testicles actually represents the Southern community's lament over the loss of its masculine potency or Southern chivalry. Apparently Benjy's idiocy, which is a manifestation of the decay, demonstrates the declining family's another disgraceful phase of degeneration. Towards the end of the novel, Jason puts Benjy in a mental asylum making another male members of the Compson family, besides Quentin, leave the already disintegrating family.

Strikingly, Jason himself is nothing like his brothers since his sole concern remains money. A wicked man, he does not give any value to love or relations in the conventional sense. He betrays his mother as well as sister. A cold-hearted man, he mocks his own mother and sees her as a saint who must suffer for her daughter's wrongdoings. As far as his own feelings for his sister Caddy are concerned, "Jason has always envied and hated her without regard to her actual behavior" (Yamaguchi 100). Being a sadist, he takes pleasure in others' pain, be it Caddy, poor Benjy or later, Miss Quentin. "He alone of all the Compson brothers has managed to sequester Caddy in a private hell, to which Jason holds the only key" (Yamaguchi 99).

Love is just a commodity for Jason; so he remains satisfied in deriving it from prostitutes alone. He sees sex as a biological process and never intends to have a child on the Compson line. Furthermore, as family honour does not mean much to him, he disposes of the family property and starts living with his mistress, thereby spoiling the gentility once embodied by the Compson family. Specially after Mr Compson's death, Jason starts acting as the superego of the family following his own sweet will arbitrarily. Jason, in short, represents a contemporary man whose morals have been wiped away by the wind of change and are replaced instead by money and ideas of self-fulfilment. It is therefore no surprise that the disintegration in the Compson household sets in rapidly as soon as Jason takes charge as the head of the family. It is ironic that while Jason never repents any of his wrongdoings, he still manages to survive unlike his siblings, and rather becomes the only Compsonthe last in the lineto survive. Though that's another issue, that his survival is meaningless because he chooses to remain childless thus halting Compson line forever.

Another Compson of the newest generation is Caddy's illegitimate daughter Miss Quentin whom Caddy has named after her brother Quentin. She grows up parentless in a hostile environment under the domination of Jason. Miss Quentin turns into a lascivious girl ready to offer herself to any man coming her way. The similarity between Miss Quentin and Caddy here represents the moral degeneration of the family which has started at a certain time in the past and continues in the present as well. Just as promiscuous as her mother, Miss Quentin runs away from the Compson house with a man from the fair, stealing three thousand dollars which have been sent by Caddy over the years to Jason for her upkeep. This spurs Jason into action and he begins to pursue his stolen money, more than Miss Quentin, ruthlessly; however, unable to find any of them, he returns dejected and defeated.

Interestingly, although each Compson in his or her own peculiar way contributes to the family decay, there are many others factors also that lead to the dissolution of the family. For instance, the financial crises and economic hardships that the family faces, play a significant role in its fall. A family that was once a specimen of the affluent and slave-owning aristocracy has now lost most of the fortune despite its frail efforts to retain its former glory. They sell most of their land to pay for Quentin's education in Harvard so as to maintain their social status but that attempt too, ends in fiasco, due to Quentin's suicide. With Jason being the only bread-winner having meagre income, the family reaches its nadir with no additional source of income; the house continues to crumble and the barn remains empty. Eventually, after Mrs. Compson's death, Jason sells the Compson house too and moves into an office above the farm-supply store where he works at a menial job of a clerk.

Another factor responsible for the family's degeneration is the lack of parental love and guidance. The children never receive adequate supervision during crises from either parent, and therefore, they

always find themselves wandering in doubts. Mr Compson seems to have bequeathed his impractical perspective about women and family honour to both Quentin and Jason. His cynical and nihilistic views have a tremendously debilitating effect on Quentin in particular. Mrs Compson, on the other hand, remains largely unavailable for the children because of which Caddy has to take up the mother's role for her brothers. Apparently, a sister cannot replace a mother and that's why, in his monologue, Quentin bemoans the fact that there was nobody whom he could call Mother. Although Mrs. Compson fails to fulfil her role as a mother, she never feels guilty about it and rather keeps on complaining about her own sickness and children especially Benjy, who continues to be a constant source of embarrassment to her. Mrs. Compson's hypochondria causes much distress to the family and thus contributes greatly to the family's sorry state. The plight of the Compson children is poignantly summed up by Quentin, who, in a delirious state, imagines himself with his family in hell, "the dungeon was Mother herself she and Father upward into weak light holding hands and us lost somewhere below even them without even a ray of light" (Faulkner 146).

There is no doubt that the Compson family's heart-rending collapse effectively symbolises the tragedy and decline of the American South in the postbellum period. Faulkner elucidates how the values once considered essential for holding a family together crumbled rapidly in the newly emancipated South and how the local community, despite resisting desperately, could not stop the onslaught of modernity. The Civil War damaged the South in multiple ways, the worst being the destruction of its moral and cultural rudiments. With the fading of the Southern idealism and values, the Southerners began to feel deprived of those crucial elements that gave them solace in the times of moral and spiritual crises. This put them in an untenable position just like the Compsons' who find themselves ill-equipped and emotionally inadequate to face the new world in the absence of such high ideals. Faulkner further shows how the Compsons, like some Southern families, sow the seeds of their own destruction with their absolute devotion to the outdated attitudes and reluctance to adapt to the changing regime while making pointless efforts to live by dying prerogatives of race, class, and sex. "By the end of the story, it is clear that the family will not continue past the current generation" (Mcarthur 34).

Interestingly, although Faulkner depicts the tragic doom of the once prosperous Compson family, he does not present a pessimistic worldview and rather offers hope through the character of Dilsey. As Volpe says, "In *The Sound and the Fury*, in which despair is the dominant mood, only the Negro Dilsey provides a measure of hope" (27). Dilsey's inherent hopefulness never exhausts and her ordeals never make her feels embittered. She always remains ready to face the ebbs and flows of life with fortitude, and therefore, aptly serves as a means to emphasize Faulkner's contention that Man will not merely endure but will prevail too.

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