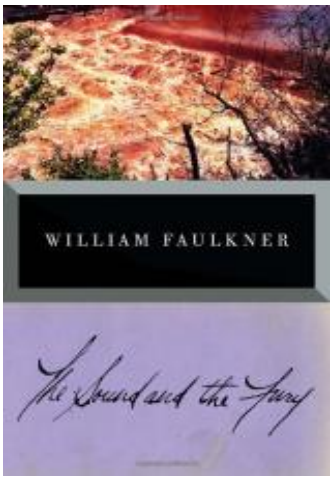
The Sound and the Fury

by William Faulkner



About the Book

The Sound and the Fury, published in October of 1929, was Faulkner's fourth novel--and clearly his first work of genius. Now considered to be one of the strongest American contributions to the fiction of high modernism, it has generated countless critical interpretations. In writing the novel, Faulkner experienced a creative absorption and passion that he was never to forget; he said of **The Sound and the Fury**, "It's the book I feel tenderest towards. I couldn't leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I'd probably fail again."

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 whom 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 the 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 $7000 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.

Because of its experimental style, **The Sound and the Fury** presents a daunting challenge for readers. By 1929 Faulkner had given up trying to please publishers and reviewers, and, as the critic Albert J. Guerard has noted, now seemed "to write only for himself and a happy few." Traditional aspects of the novel like exposition, plot, and character development are cast aside in the attempt to find a narrative form that could represent the realities of mental chaos, the fluidity of time and memory, and the painful interweaving of separate selves in family life. Though at times Faulkner's

material may seem so inchoate as to be barely containable within language at all, **The Sound and the Fury** attains heights and depths of expression that are truly breathtaking: it is an unforgettable work that richly rewards the reader's efforts.

Discussion Guide

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..." [p. 233]. 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?

Author Bio

William Faulkner (1897-1962), who came from an old southern family, grew up in Oxford, Mississippi. He joined the Canadian, and later the British, Royal Air Force during the First World War, studied for a while at the University of Mississippi, and temporarily worked for a New York bookstore and a New Orleans newspaper. Except for some trips to Europe and Asia, and a few brief stays in Hollywood as a scriptwriter, he worked on his novels and short stories on a farm in Oxford.

In an attempt to create a saga of his own, Faulkner has invented a host of characters typical of the historical growth and

subsequent decadence of the South. The human drama in Faulkner's novels is then built on the model of the actual, historical drama extending over almost a century and a half. Each story and each novel contributes to the construction of a whole, which is the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants. Their theme is the decay of the old South, as represented by the Sartoris and Compson families, and the emergence of ruthless and brash newcomers, the Snopeses. Theme and technique - the distortion of time through the use of the inner monologue are fused particularly successfully in THE SOUND AND THE FURY (1929), the downfall of the Compson family seen through the minds of several characters. The novel SANCTUARY (1931) is about the degeneration of Temple Drake, a young girl from a distinguished southern family. Its sequel, REQUIEM FOR A NUN (1951), written partly as a drama, centered on the courtroom trial of a Negro woman who had once been a party to Temple Drake's debauchery. In LIGHT IN AUGUST (1932), prejudice is shown to be most destructive when it is internalized, as in Joe Christmas, who believes, though there is no proof of it, that one of his parents was a Negro. The theme of racial prejudice is brought up again in ABSALOM, ABSALOM! (1936), in which a young man is rejected by his father and brother because of his mixed blood. Faulkner's most outspoken moral evaluation of the relationship and the problems between Negroes and whites is to be found in INTRUDER IN THE DUST (1948).

In 1940, Faulkner published the first volume of the Snopes trilogy, THE HAMLET, to be followed by two volumes, THE TOWN (1957) and THE MANSION (1959), all of them tracing the rise of the insidious Snopes family to positions of power and wealth in the community. THE REIVERS, his last - and most humorous - work, with great many similarities to Mark Twain's HUCKLEBERRY FINN, appeared in 1962, the year of Faulkner's death.

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