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TRAGEDY AND TRAGIC CHARACTERS IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S NOVEL *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

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Abstract

In this study Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and The Fury* that is dealt with in terms of tragedy coming about after a central event that affects the characters in the novel. Being one of the most significant writers of 20th century American Literature, Faulkner displays this event and the tragic characters by the help of stream of consciousness technique. This technique assists the reader to figure out the deterioration of the characters in the novel. The aim of the study is to demonstrate how a tragic event can influence people's lives. The study is composed through literature review. It is thought that Faulkner's writing technique helps reader to comprehend and feel the tragic positions and mood of the characters as using stream of consciousness technique, he writes on individuals' thoughts that focus on past events affecting everything. To conclude, the study shows that the writer is so successful in revealing the main tragic event and the tragic characters that reader can visualize the situations and characters more vividly and also she or he can realize the consecutive tragedies that overset the lives.

Keywords: American Literature, Tragedy, Tragic Characters.

Introduction

Being one of the most significant authors of the twentieth century American Literature, Faulkner focuses on the thoughts, emotions and memories of the characters in his novel *The Sound and The Fury*. By doing that, he benefits from technique of "Stream of Consciousness." In fact, in his novel the events and thoughts of the characters are based on one of the female characters, Caddy and the author portrays and gives detailed information about this character by the help of other characters' thoughts and behaviors towards her because of whom the breakdown of The Compson family is inevitable.

In addition, the novel *The Sound and The Fury* is about the Compson brothers' obsession with their sister. The author shows through different points of views that the wealth, the land and the status of this family is deteriorating day by day. The reason of this deterioration is the issue caused by Caddy since she brings about shame among her family members. Thus, as the virginity that is seen as so important thing to be possessed by the women, loss of it gives rise to decline of the Compson family.

Writing this novel Faulkner is seen to be so successful in displaying the tragic characters' lives using thoughts and emotions of the individuals. Using stream of consciousness technique, the female character, Caddy is described through the eyes of her brothers. In other words, "The novel revolves around Caddy and after sorting the viewpoints of the monologues of each her brothers" (Whitfield, 1977, 3), the Faulkner is going on story using third person narrator in the end of the novel. Additionally, the author demonstrates tragic characters using a kind of logical order by dealing with the main tragedy that is related to Caddy's

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virginity. He shows that around this main tragic event the other characters are affected so tragically. Thence, the Compson family's values and fame begin to ooze away.

1. William Faulkner's Life and Literary Works

Faulkner who is regarded as one of the best-known American authors was born in Mississippi in 1897. He had a Southern family. He had three brothers and his mother and grandmother and "Caroline Barr (the Black woman who raised him from infancy) crucially influenced the development of Faulkner's artistic imagination" ("William Faulkner", 1). He was a successful child at school. Then in his continuing education, he "became somewhat indifferent to his schoolwork" (1). His school performance declined over time.

During Faulkner's childhood, he listened stories on war and slavery from his elders. In his adolescence, he wrote some poems. "He did not write his first novel until 1925" (1). He liked literary works and completed his education at Yale and the University of Mississippi. At University of Mississippi he was encouraged to be a writer. Faulkner was influence by the stories told about his older family. Moreover, the region where he lived affected him greatly. His life in Mississippi shaped his writing style, writing issues, themes and Southern characters about whom he wrote too much.

He married Estelle Oldham in 1929. He supported his family as a writer. After three years of their marriage, his financial situation began to decline and even if he doesn't like film so much, he accepted the job offer to be a screenwriter for some years. He also worked as a writer at the University of Virginia. One day when he was riding a horse an accident happened and he got some injuries. At the age of sixty-four he died in 1962.

Faulkner published some of his novels and short stories from 1920s to the World War II. At the age of fifty-two he was awarded the Noble Prize. His stories were about Southerners, slavery and working class. In his writings emotional, Gothic and grotesque style are seen. In addition to novels and short stories, he wrote plays, poems and essays. Actually, he is "known for his novels and short stories set in the fictional Yoknapatowpha County" ("William Faulkner", 1). His fourth novel *The Sound and The Fury* (1929) was listed as one of the best of a hundred novels in English of twentieth century.

Moreover, his novels *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) were also listed as best novels of 20th century. "In his works he deals with problems and difficulties of life in the American South" (Vicek, 2012, 1). As he was raised in South of America, he is successful in describing the lives of aristocrats, their development and decline in different periods of the history of America. He is viewed as "hugely imaginative writer" (Matthews, 2009, vii). "He is a novelist of a great stature and is known exclusively for his narrative technique" (Prabhu, 2015, 23). This technique was an inspiration from the American author Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Faulkner has published 19 novels, 3 short stories, 3 poetry books and a play-novel" (26). He was regarded as one of the most prolific writers in the 20th century since "He renders the exact nature of human conditions and places them in his own physical setting" (27). In addition, his creativeness of writing style and his creative imagination of "a whole fictional world full of extraordinary characters and stories have stimulated close study of his technique and themes" (Matthews, 2009, vii).

Faulkner's novel *The Sound and The Fury* was seen as the "most cherished work" (Farkas, 2017, 15). In this novel the story chronology "is scrambled, memory flashbacks from different past events are interspersed with events happening in the narrative present" (Farkas, 2016, 168). It tells the "breakdown of breakdown of Compson family, caused by pregnant before marriage. In this story Caddy becomes the center of the problem" (Rifa'tin, 2009, 1).

His novel *The Sound and The Fury* is regarded as a significant novel "in exploring the old Christian traditions and the aristocratic values, the modern society that adopt these values" (Al-Keshwan, 2016, 113). In fact, the author's main aim for showing these values is to leave them and renew the notions on them. By doing that, Faulkner "portrays the downfall of a once very influential, Southern family, the Compsons" (Vicek, 2012, 3). The author is so successful in demonstrating the breakdown of the old South and the loss of values of elders by describing tragic characters and their thought in a logical way.

2. The Logical Tragedy and Tragic Issues in *The Sound and The Fury*

The novel *The Sound and The Fury* deals with the corruption of the Compsons, who have been a prominent family in Mississippi. Faulkner demonstrates the human experience by portraying events through lots of different characters' memories of their childhood. This novel is generally regarded as Faulkner's most important and remarkable literary work. In this work, Faulkner shows that man does not choose to live his own life. Then even when a man becomes a materialist or mentally disabled, he is unable to see life but only having images, sounds and memories.



At a basic level, the novel is about the three Compson brothers' obsessions with their sister Caddy. The first three chapters of the novel consist of the thoughts, voices, and memories of the three Compson brothers. The brothers are Benjy, Quentin, Jason. Faulkner tells the fourth chapter in third person narrative. The author displays the brothers' memories of their sister Caddy and examines the deterioration of the Southern aristocratic class after the Civil War. As the children grow older, the sister, Caddy begins to behave promiscuously. Therefore, Quentin becomes upset and Benjy cries since their sister loses the virginity and becomes pregnant. Caddy's pregnancy influences Quentin so deeply that he lies and says his father that he and Caddy have committed incest. Due to his father's indifference, Quentin commits suicide.

Caddy is the reason of obsession in Compson family. In fact, she feels guilty for her promiscuity. She is aware of the fact that her brothers feel upset for her conduct. She does not give importance to her family's history. Her behaviors affect her brother, Quentin's mind. Quentin can not escape the tragic world of Compson family, but Caddy manages to get away. Her brother Benjy is mentally disabled so he cannot comprehend any values and he can only remember the visual and auditing images. He has also too much love for her sister. He only moans and cries for his family's deterioration.

One of the main tragic characters in the novel is Quentin Compson who is Caddy's one of the brothers. To him, he is responsible for living up his family's past greatness and honor. He is obsessed with Caddy. He thinks that traditional Southern values are so significant. Due to these thoughts, he feels very sorry for Caddy's promiscuity. When he learns that his father does not care about the traditions and the shame her sister's behavior has brought the family, Quentin feels worse. So, finding that his sister and father have disregarded the morality he becomes pessimistic. To him, being moral is so important and that gives order and meaning to his life.

Compsons is an aristocrat family so they should defend the honor of their family. Men should act like gently and the women should be models of feminine purity. Actually, after Civil War, most of the Southern families corrupted socially and psychologically, like Compsons. Quentin's obsession with old Southern morality influences him deeply and he begins to be in a more tragic situation. Though Quentin loves her sister, his love is obsessive. The values of the society are corrupted by the Compson family and they should recapture what they have lost.

In this novel Quentin's death, Mr. Compson's death and Caddy's loss of virginity, in general the decline of the family is witnessed. Benjy, Quentin, and Jason have different views on the Compson tragedy. Quentin can not move beyond his memories of the past. So he sees no solution but suicide. Jason focuses on the present. To him, personal gain is significant. Each of the Compson brothers understands order and troubles chaos in a different way.

The Sound and the Fury shows that the standard of tragedy contains the logic of its own failure" (Bloom, 1988, 57). As understood from the novel, the wealthy and famous family members of Compson family gradually become obsessed by the event that causes their family's honor to vanish. At first, the grandfather dies and then the father dies. Since they are the representatives of their past values, the important concepts also are lost. "The period of Faulkner's great modern tragedies begins with a statement of the disqualification of such tragedy by its own logic" (60).

Faulkner's novel, however, probes to an inchoate, divisive logic of tragedy operating throughout thought and experience. *The Sound and the Fury* relocates the schism of tragedy in a basically dichotomous worldview. And in so doing, it discloses the potential of tragedy to become continuous with its antitype, pathos. Insofar as tragedy conventionally entails resolution, the very ubiquity of tragic schism ironically produces the repetitious, inconclusive situation of tragedy's opposite. Instead of catastrophe, there is repeated disaster (59).

Since the author uses the stream of consciousness technique throughout the novel, one can only understand the tragedy of the Compsons' by the way of different narrators' thoughts. Showing us the deteriorating situations of the members of the family, Faulkner provides an effective feeling towards the tragic positions of the characters. In the novel, there are various and different calamities and some of that occurs only in characters' mental habits. "Not surprisingly, Quentin has been the primary focus for discussing the novel's tragic dimensions" (59). Quentin's position is more touching than the other characters. His memories give him more sadness.

... the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to



conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools (Faulkner, 1946, 95).

"Quentin's first memory upon waking is of his father giving him Grandfather's watch..." (Bloom, 1988, 60) This watch reminds him his father and ancestors. Giving the watch, his father emphasizes that the reason why he gives his son the watch is, maybe Quentin forget the importance of time. To his father, the time should not be wasted. He wants his son not to challenge with the time but to remember it. The father also states that nobody can be victorious over the time. Nevertheless, time will remove all pain, especially his son, Quentin's obsession about Caddy. The disasters are temporary and can be forgotten through time. But to Quentin, he "...has had to learn that feeling is suffering, but then to be faced with the loss of suffering too is unthinkable" (64). Because the bad events that have occurred in his family, he do not want to wear see this watch, since it reminds him the values that should be obeyed. He is obsessed with the act of his sister, Caddy. Therefore, he does desire to remember the past morality of his family. To him, what her sister have done is contradictory comparing his family's name. Quentin's watch is a gift from his father, who hopes that it will alleviate Quentin's feeling that he must devote so much attention to watching time himself. Nevertheless, it constantly reminds Quentin of the heritage his family considers so important. Quentin is trapped by time, unable to escape from his memories of the past. He attempts to escape time's grasp by breaking his watch, but its ticking continues to haunt him. He sees no solution but suicide.

And Father said It's because you are a virgin: don't you see? Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you don't know. You can't know and he said Yes. On the instant when we come to realise that tragedy is second-hand (Faulkner, 1946, 135).

Here, Mr. Compson wants to prove that Caddy's virginity has always been an illusion. He knows that his son is deeply affected by the Caddy. "For the father, passion is passive..." (Bloom, 1988, 64) After the war, even some of men, like Quentin wants to protect the significant notions of their family, being a woman Caddy does not gives importance to this issues and her behaviors cause him to worry. "...the father reassures Quentin that the dishonor of sisters recurs in life, that "tragedy is second-hand" (64).

The Compson children seek to escape from the passivity of their suffering, a condition ironically produced by the binary worldview tradition ally suited to heroic action. The central, insidious cause of their debility is that this same orientation threatens to alienate them from their own experience. The attempt to reclaim the personal dimension of their lives, consequently, is a deeply purposeful act, a nascent counter to passivity. For Quentin, the crucial issue is his passion (63-64).

Actually, the members of the Compsons family long for running away from the troubles of the family. Because of the shame Caddy have brought on their family, her brothers do not dare to have any romantic love and a relationship with a woman. The brothers has different points of views and realizes life differently. But using this fragmented technique, the author aims to portray the disaster that leads the family member to live hopelessly. All brothers suffer in their lives. To Quentin, the most important thing is his love for his sister. So, he wants to kill her husbands since she considers that "...the same evil repeated through time" (64).

Benjy and Quentin in particular experience even their own body processes, thoughts, and actions as alienated. The Compson world frustrates the individualism it espouses by a binary orientation that in effect denies basic self-esteem. Despite their aversion to anomaly, the Compsons live this fundamental contradiction. Yet they neither subside into numbness nor yield their stubborn hold on personal value. They continue to grasp both individualism and a self-defeating way of founding it. Although tragedy within their world is second-hand, we as readers can see in such persistence a necessary element of tragedy (65).

Actually, the Compson brothers not only affected mentally but also psychologically. The disaster that has occurred in the family influences the characters individually and differently. Even they can not understand their thoughts and actions. What Caddy has done, vanish the self respects of the individuals. They disgust the incest but they feel upset since they think that they have lost their only sister. So there is a contradiction in their thoughts. "And Benjy and Quentin each deploy the similar fable of "his" Caddy and her symbolic substitutes as objects of passion" (65). During their grandfathers' time, there was not any



family disaster, so Quentin believes that the tragedy is second hand. The values of their ancestors are deteriorating. Therefore, their position shows tragedy.

We have distinguished two phases in the novel's tragic process: the decline of action into passivity, and the attempt at reversal. In the first, Quentin's pathos, both pathological and nonpathological, derives from a logic of tragedy that Faulkner has read back into daily life. In the second, Quentin's effort to reclaim the personal by commitment to his passion creates the passion necessary to tragedy. Passion itself becomes purposeful action and transcends the condition of simple passivity (67).

As stated, there is two kinds of tragedy in the novel. One sees that when the characters shown in action firstly, they gradually do not act and only their ideas are witnessed. Only through their minds and thoughts one can comprehend what is the reason of their worry. In the novel, the author demonstrates the logic of tragedy and one pities the state of Quentin. He feels bad, since he is aware of the fact that his sister's wrong behaviour has corrupted his family and his family's codes. Quentin really loves her sister and his ideas about her makes him upset and even her psychology worsens. The passion he has for his sister can be seen as an action. His real trouble is his sister's maturity and dishonor. His pain is significant. In this novel, "...not only is catastrophe lacking, but there is no direct recognition of suffering as sometimes, in effect, substitutes for catastrophe or augments it (67). Since the author has used a different technique, it is not easy to realize that the characters are suffering as one can see in a real tragedy. The characters suffers especially because of their memories. Their past do not leave them. Even though there is a few action in this work, the individuals unable to destroy their past and their thoughts affect them psychologically.

"Quentin's death is a bid for tragic recognition" (Bloom, 1988, 68). We know that Quentin is suffering but maybe if he did not die, his state would not be tragic for the reader. Actually, his position is not so sad. But when he commit suicide, one can feel sorry for him, like in a tragic event. "In this embattled conclusive suffering, a victory could be claimed for the defiant heroic temper..." (68) His sufferind ends with dying and this dying can be seen as a victory considering his thoughts that do not leave him. His suicide is personal experience.

To Faulkner "...certain basic human traits, types, and life-patterns continue throughout history, though constantly in new forms" (68). When one consider the novel from this aspect, he or she can indicate that even though early Compson family has not been incestuous the new Compsons have incest. Like author's thought, "throughout history" one generation comes and the other generation goes, so they have got different personalities and different lives. "There is, in fact, a continuity of conflict for the inheritors of the heroic temper and its fateful logic" (68). Even though the caharacters, like Quentin, want to overcome the bad effects of their past, it is difficult since there is always a continuity.

In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it. Because it means less to women, Father said. He said it was men invented virginity not women. Father said it's like death: only a state in which the others are left and I said. But to believe it doesn't matter and he said, That's what sos ad about anything: not only virginity, and I said, Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin and he said, That's why that's sad too; nothing is even worth the cahanging of it (Faulkner,1946, 97).

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the aristocratic Compson family's long fall is demonstrated. The family members suffers because of Caddy's promiscuity, pregnancy and her short marriage and deaths occurring in the family. Learning his sister's state, Quentin is horrified. He turns to his father for help. He tells his father that they have committed incest, but his father realizes that he si lying for protecting his sister. But Mr. Compson implies that virginity should not be taken seriously. He also emphasizes that time will heal their present situation. Nevertheless, Quentin thinks that he can save his sister by joining her in punishment she will be forced to endure. In his mind, he felt a need to take responsibility for Caddy's sin. After some time, Quentin's main obsession becomes Caddy's virginity and purity. He is also obsessed with old Southern ideals of honor; therefore, he is protective of his sister. But he loses his only sister. Ultimately, he can not cope with the amorality of the world around him. He commits suicide as the tragic end of the damaging influence of his father's indifference and his inability to cope with Caddy's sexual promiscuity.

Likewise, other character of the novel, Benjy is also obsessed with his sister Caddy. He states that "Caddy smells like trees" (62). When he is young, Caddy is Benjy's mother figure. She is also his source of affection. Caddy's absence influences him, too. His early memories shows that Caddy's youthful innocence is associated with the smell of the trees near which they have played. Benjy notices the change in her state.



This realization affects him. He begins to lament for losing her and says that she does not smell like trees any more.

Conclusion

The novel *The Sound and the Fury* has achieved a great deal of success and has been seen as one of the prominent American novels. The characters of the novel are tragic, like Caddy and Quentin. They can not survive within the traditional society and they reject its values. After the war there occur new values and traditions in their society. During the time of their grandfather, there is a notion that women should protect their innocence and must not commit incest. But Caddy loses her purity and is disowned by her family. Being the only daughter of the family, Caddy affects her brother. Her father thinks that virginity is not so important to the new generation, after the war. Then he wants to comfort his son Quentin with the utterance that the time provides them forgetting this event.

Analyzing the novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, one can conclude that there is an obvious tragedy in this novel. After the war, the old values are lost, but there are some people who want to protect the old traditions, like Quentin. To him to be virgin is so significant and even though his sister has an affair with a man, she should protect her. Being the oldest son, he thinks that he is responsible for his family honor and reputation. When his father does not give importance to the state of his only daughter, Quentin lies. He states that in fact they have committed incest. Nevertheless, his father does not believe in him and want Caddy to marry man. Since she marries a man, her brothers lose her. After years, we understand that the brothers are so obsessed with their sister and their memories of her do not leave them.

The most tragic character of the novel is Quentin since time does not destroys his obsession about Caddy. Whatever he does, he remembers her. Even though he has tried to protect her because of her is he cannot do anything. His sister marries another man who is not the real father of her child. So, the man divorces her. The time does not change anything. Everything reminds him Caddy. At the end, Quentin commits suicide and only by the help of this his memories left him. Because of the fact that the character's life ends with death, he is seen as tragic. His death is toching and one can have pity on him. The deteriorating situations of his family are the reasons of his death.

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