50 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Sound and the Fury (1929)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

"It is as merciless as anything I know which has come out of Russia. I find myself wishing for someone with whom to compare William Faulkner, but to compare this writer from Mississippi with James Joyce or Marcel Proust or Chekov or Dostoevsky gets one nowhere, for Faulkner is definitely American…. If Faulkner is mad, then James Joyce is equally so; if Faulkner is obsessed with futility and insanity, so is Fyodor Dostoevsky. It is true that *The Sound and the Fury* is insane and monstrous and terrible, but so is the life that it mirrors…. I believe simply and sincerely that this is a great book."

Lyle Saxon
New York Herald Tribune
(13 October 1929) 3

"In *The Sound and the Fury* Mr. Faulkner introduces us to a degenerate Southern family, some of whom are sane and mean, or sane and weak; and of the others, one is an imbecile and one is the victim of a suicidal mania. The first two sections, occupying a little over half the book, are devoted to the imbecile and the suicide; and it is here that the author makes his highly original and decidedly bewildering use of the stream-of-consciousness technique.

One day of the imbecile's life is recorded. He is thirty-three years old, but he has retained the mentality of a child of five, and he has so little control of his mental processes that any slightest suggestion will take him back to some earlier period of his life, and he will be living past days over again as if they were here and now. Throughout some ninety pages the record keeps skipping back and forth between this April 7, 1928, and a considerable number of earlier times. The mentality of the imbecile being identical for all these different times, it is often difficult to tell what period of his life is being presented. The only indication given by the author of the shift from one to another is the use of italics at the point of the shift. Many characters make their appearance in the several periods, brothers and sisters, father and mother, negroes young and old; and it is only what they do that lets us know what relation they bear to Maury [Benjy]. And then, to make confusion worse confounded, it turns out that, for superstitious reasons, Maury's parents have changed his name to Benjamin, so that he is referred to now by one name, now by another. Besides which, there are two characters of different sexes named Quentin, one a brother, and one a niece of Benjy.

A variant of this method is used for the second section, recording a day in the life of Quentin, the suicide, the brother who was sent to Harvard—a day in Massachusetts into which intrude enormous broken fragments of the earlier life of Quentin in Mississippi. Mr. Faulkner has here made an extremely ingenious use of narrative devices derived from Joyce, which I cannot stop to describe in detail. In the rest of the book the method departs less from the normal."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth-Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 520-21

"In *The Sound and the Fury,* Quentin Compson represents all that is left of the Sartoris tradition. The rest of the family have either succumbed entirely to the Snopes world, like Jason Compson, or else have drugs to isolate themselves from it—Mr. Compson his fragments of philosophy, Uncle Maury his liquor, Mrs. Compson her religion and her invalidism, Benjy his idiocy. But Quentin's very body is 'an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names.' His world is peopled with 'baffled, outraged ghosts'; and although Quentin himself is 'still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost,' he is one of them. However, it is evident that Quentin's traditionalism is far gone in the direction of formalization, with its concomitant lack of vitality; he is psychologically kin to Bayard Sartoris and to Narcissa Benbow. When he discovers that his

sister Candace has been giving herself to the town boys of Jefferson, Mississippi, and is pregnant, he attempts to change her situation by telling their father that he has committed incest with her. It is a key incident. Quentin is attempting to transform Candace's yielding to the amorality of the Snopes world into a sin, within the Sartoris morality; but the means he employs are more nearly pseudo-traditional and romantic than traditional; and he fails.

Quentin tells his father: 'It was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity.' Precisely. The loud world is the Snopes world, with which the Compson house has become thoroughly infected and to which it is subject. Quentin is really *striving toward the condition of tragedy* for his family; he is trying to transform meaningless degeneracy into significant doom. But because his moral code is no longer vital, he fails and ends in a kind of escapism, breaking his watch to put himself beyond time, finally killing himself to escape consciousness. Only he is aware of the real meaning of his struggle, which sets up the dramatic tension in *The Sound and the Fury.* In a way, Quentin's struggle is Mr. Faulkner's own struggle as an artist."

George Marion O'Donnell
"Faulkner's Mythology"
The Kenyon Review I.3 (1939)

"Certainly the craft of *The Sound and the Fury* is brilliantly planned. Once the central structure is arrived at, every detail falls into its place with a sort of astounding precision. Like the opening of a safe, given the combination, we can hear all the bolts clicking into place; and we may suspect that Faulkner has added a few extra bolts just for the satisfaction of making them click…. Very often the use of these details at once so mathematical and dramatic is justified…. For in *The Sound and the Fury* the technique of the novel, and its pyrotechnics, are after all subordinated to a meaning—to the history of the degenerating Compsons."

Maxwell Geismar
Writers in Crisis
(Houghton 1942) 157-58

"Faulkner's image is not so much that of an absurd world as it is that of a universe in which everything is given at the same time, in which all beings are first perceived together. In this sense the interior monologue of the idiot Benjy assumes a symbolic character. It restores for us the image of that synthetic universe of the 'whole of feeling,' to use F. H. Bradley's expression, in which reality has not yet been broken up into a multiplicity of appearances by the intervention of clear consciousness."

Claude-Edmonde Magny
"Faulkner or Theological Inversion"
L'Age du Roman americain
trans. Jacqueline Merriam
(Paris: Editions du Seuil 1948) 196-243

"To speak of greatness with regard to one's contemporaries is dangerous. But if there are any American novels of the present century which may be called great, which bear comparison—serious if not favorable—with the achievements of twentieth-century European literature, then surely *The Sound and the Fury* is among them. It is one of the three or four American works of prose fiction written since the turn of the century in which the impact of tragedy is felt and sustained. Seized by his materials, Faulkner keeps, for once, within his esthetic means, rarely trying to say more than he can or needs to. *The Sound and the Fury* is the one novel in which his vision and technique are almost in complete harmony, and the vision itself whole and major. Whether taken as a study of the potential for human self-destruction, or as a rendering of the social disorder particular to our time, the novel projects a radical image of man against the wall. Embodied and justified, this is an image of great writing."

Irving Howe
William Faulkner
(Random 1952) 126-27

"The story is told in four parts, through the stream of consciousness of three characters (the sons of the Compson family, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason), and finally in an objective account. The Compson family, formerly genteel Southern patricians, now lead a degenerate, perverted life on their shrunken plantation near Jefferson, Miss. The disintegration of the family, which clings to outworn aristocratic conventions, is counterpointed by the strength of the black servant, who include old Dilsey and her son Luster. The latter tends the idiot Benjy Copson, who is 33 and incapable of speech or any but the simplest actions. Through his broken thoughts, which revert to his childhood at every chance stimulation of his acute senses, is disclosed the tragedy of his drunken father; his proud, sniveling, hypochondriac mother; his weak-minded Uncle Maury; his sister Candace (Caddy), whom he adores because she is kind to him; his mean, dishonest brother Jason; and his sensitive brother Quentin, a promising student at Harvard, who goes mad, obsessed by his love of Caddy, and, shamed by her seduction, commits suicide. When Caddy is forced to marry and leave home, Benjy is desolate, but he plays like a child with her illegitimate daughter, until she grows up, gives evidence of her mother's nymphomaniac strain, runs away with a tent-show performer, and steals a sum of money from Jason."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 709

"Quentin himself is involved in a family tragedy as harrowing as that of the Sutpens—and this is the theme of *The Sound and the Fury.* His father is a drunkard, his mother a selfish, neurotic fool; his brother Benjy is an idiot; his sister Candace a nymphomaniac; and the only really responsible member of the family, his brother Jason, such a monster of cruelty that the others seem amiable beside him. Quentin loves Candace so much that to save her from a forced marriage, he pretends to have had incestuous relations with her, but the expedient fails to work, and he drowns himself in the Charles River. There is another Quentin in the book, Candace's daughter (not by her husband), who is named after her uncle and inherits the sensual proclivities of her mother; any chance she might have had of escaping the general doom is effectually frustrated by the cruelty with which Jason drives her into fierce rebellion."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 420

"Perhaps the first hint or foreshadowing occurs when the idiot Ben touches a place on the wall where a mirror used to be….associations evoked by that 'dark place' and that fire, Faulkner proceeds to develop a gradually revealing series of analogues, involving Ben and his sister Caddy and his mother at about the time he had been repudiated by his family through the act of changing his name from Maury to Benjamin…. As Ben's angle of vision changed, he could no longer see the reflection of fire in the mirror. But the immediate context suggests a symbolic value for that sentence: As Ben turns from Caddy to his mother he suffers a sense of loss which may be symbolized by the disappearance of the reflected fire. His next associational memory dramatizes several reasons why Ben may well have suffered a sense of loss whenever he turned from Caddy to his mother….

Caddy, motivated by her compassion for her younger brother, has eagerly given Ben the kind of motherly attention previously denied to him because of his own mother's inadequacies. Tenderly, solicitously, Caddy has discovered ways of appealing to Ben's limited responses, to satisfy his instinctive and unreasoning hunger for orderliness, peacefulness, serenity. The fire, the red-yellow cushion, the smooth satin slipper are only a few of the objects used by Caddy to provide him with values which are positive to him because they are somehow sustaining. Then Caddy has also taught Ben the pleasure of multiplying these positive values through their reflections in the mirror. Because she has heightened his awareness of all those symmetrical visions of 'bright, smooth shapes' which comfort him, it might be said that Caddy herself has become for Ben a kind of mirror of all his positive values, framed in love: her love for him and his love for her….

Her presence was Ben's joy; her absence his grief; her possible return his hope. The arrangement of these fragments in Part One enables Faulkner to withhold conclusive information as to how it happened that the finely sensitive and mothering child Caddy has so completely disappeared. The reader's tension of

interest concerning that question is gradually resolved through various later uses of mirror analogues which disclose related aspects of Faulkner's complex theme. Throughout *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner employs the convention of using some of the characters to serve as mirrors of other characters: mirrors set at different angles so that they provide contrasting angles of vision….

Although various characters in the narrative reflect various images of Ben, all these images may be reduced to two roughly antithetical categories: most of the characters view Ben as a disgrace, a menace, or at least as a slobbering idiot. By contrast, those who genuinely love Ben (particularly Caddy and the Negro servant Dilsey) insist that Ben has certain particular and extraordinary powers of perception. As Roskus phrases it, 'He know lot more than folks thinks.' Repeatedly Ben is represented as having the instinctive and intuitive power to differentiate between objects or actions which are life-encouraging and others which are life-injuring, and these are used by Faulkner to symbolize the antithesis between good and evil. In this limited sense, then, Ben serves as a kind of moral mirror….

Faulkner develops this aspect of Ben's significance in four episodes which illuminate the progressive phases of Caddy's growth. When she is old enough to be interested in adolescent courtship, she discovers that Ben's unreasoning reaction against the smell of perfume gives her a sense of guilty and prompts her to wash herself clean—a primitive ritual repeatedly correlated with Ben's potential for serving as moral agent and moral conscience in his family. Later, when Ben escapes from the house one night, to find Caddy and Charlie kissing in the swing on the lawn, Caddy leaves Charlie, ostensibly to quiet Ben, but also because Ben has again evoked in her a sense of guilt….

The third time when Ben is represented as a moral mirror occurs as Caddy returns home immediately after her first complete sexual experience. In that scene Faulkner correlates two implicit analogies which complement each other: first, the analogue of Ben as moral mirror; secondly, the analogue between simple physical vision and conscious moral vision, suggested by the persistent recurrence of the word 'eyes' and the cognate words, 'looking' and 'seeing,' as Ben again evokes in Caddy a deeper sense of guilt…. Each of these three closely related episodes (involving Ben as moral mirror and also involving the symbolic and penitent ritual of washing away guilt with water) is associated with Ben's recollection with his ultimate reaction, at the time of Caddy's fake wedding, where the sense of guilt was ironically washed away with champagne until the celebration was terminated by Ben's unreasoning and bellowing protest.

This fourth episode represents the end of the period in Ben's life when Caddy had been able to help him by bringing relative order out of his relatively chaotic experience, and the end of the period when Ben had served as a moral mirror for Caddy…. These two endings are obliquely suggested by reiterative mirror imagery in Quentin's recollection of that incident which broke up the wedding celebration…. Gradually…the reader appreciates that Mrs. Compson, Quentin, and Jason, each motivated by different kinds of need for self-justification, have first made a scapegoat of Ben and have then made a scapegoat of Caddy, so that they may heap on these two scapegoats the ultimate blame for the disintegration of the Compson family….

In Part Two of *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner gradually suggests antithetical contrasts between Ben's preoccupation with mirrors and Quentin's preoccupation with mirrors…. Quentin is…'a sort of obverse reflection' of Ben. By contrast with Ben's instinctive response to objects used to symbolize positive values in human experience, Quentin serves to dramatize a consciously willed and obsessive love for the negative values which are life-injuring, life-destroying, and which, in turn, are nicely symbolized by his elaborately planned act of suicide by drowning. Throughout *The Sound and the Fury* a recurrent motif, suggested by the title itself, is the traditional convention of conflict between order-producing forces and chaos-producing forces in human experience, here represented in part by the gradual drift of the Compson family from remembered dignity and order toward disgrace and chaos. Quentin is represented as one whose disordering self-love motivates not only his masochistic delight in creating inner chaos but also his erotic lust for his own death…. Structurally, then, the juxtaposition of Ben's thirty-third birthday against Quentin's death day accentuates the contrasting life-visions symbolized by Ben (who is ironically the shame of the Compsons) and by Quentin (who is ironically the pride of the Compsons)….

‘When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o’clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch’…. The pivotal image there is ‘shadow,’ an image subsequently enriched by Faulkner to represent Quentin’s *alter ego*, his own reflected image of himself, developed by Quentin as an elaborate mirror analogue…. To achieve his willed act of self-destruction, he is aware that he must cope with that other side of self which is represented by his physical being or body, which intuitively or instinctively clings to life while resisting the death-will of his mind. To insult and belittle that resisting other self (the body), Quentin identifies his body with his sun-cast shadow. Because the sun is repeatedly represented as creating the shadow of his body, this shadow might be considered poetically as the body’s tribute to the life-giving power of the sun. But this is exactly the kind of tribute which Quentin wishes to deny….

At first glance, this echo of the traditional body-versus-spirit antithesis suggests Quentin’s warped Calvinistic Presbyterian heritage. On reconsideration, it becomes obvious that the thing which Quentin does not want to do is to live; that which his body tries to do is to resist Quentin’s obsessive and erotic lust for death. Consequently Quentin perversely views the body’s natural death-resistance as the body’s attempt to ‘trick’ him. This inverted concept evokes his further conviction that he must counter-attack that body-impulse by managing somehow to subdue and ‘trick’ his shadow…. Obviously, Quentin’s ultimate tricking of his ‘shadow’ must be the destruction of his body in the planned act of suicide by drowning. In developing the double significance of this act (as being desired by the will and as being not desired by the body), Faulkner makes pertinent use of Quentin’s initial experience on a bridge over the Charles River, where he stands contemplating his own shadow mirrored on the surface of the water below…. Later, from another bridge, Quentin blindly contemplates another symbolic shadow: the trout, instinctively fulfilling its potentialities as it swims against the destructive element in which it has its being….

The trout, the gull, the Mayflies, along with Ben, make available to the reader the kinds of metaphorical ‘mirrors’ of meaning which Quentin refuses to understand. By contrast with Ben, Quentin has a tendency to use all mirrors (literal or figurative) to multiply negative values, particularly those disordered and chaotic values symbolized by the reflection of his own death-obsessed face…after returning to his dormitory room to clean himself up for death, stands before a conventional mirror, brushing his hair, troubled at the thought that Shreve, his roommate, may return in time to spoil his plans….

Faulkner’s most elaborately contrived mirror analogue, in the presentation of Quentin’s death day, stands out as technically different from any mirror analogue we have yet considered. It is a figurative or symbolic mirroring of the meaning of a past action in a present action: the parallelism between the way Quentin plays big brother to the little Italian girl and the way Quentin previously played big brother to Caddy. Another kind of ‘broken mirror’ effect is achieved by scattering through the entire episode involving the Italian girl fragments of memories concerning earlier and related episodes involving Quentin and Caddy…. To a large degree, Quentin is represented as having been personally responsible for the change which occurred in the character of Caddy. Yet, even as Quentin rejects as ridiculous the charge of the Italian brother, ‘You steela my sister,’ so he also rejects and ignores even the suggestions made by his own conscious or subconscious associations that he was, indeed, in some way responsible for what happened to Caddy….

Instead of driving around the monument in the accustomed way, [Luster] starts Queenie the wrong way. Ben, instinctively feeling the difference between right and wrong even in such a trivial situation, begins to bellow and continues until the minor chaos of that situation (ironically corrected by Jason, out of mete embarrassment) has given way to the ritual of orderly return. So the total action of the narrative ends with the implicit and symbolic reiteration of the part Ben has played throughout, in terms of the antithesis between the human power to create chaos and the human power to create order….

Faulkner’s choice of title deserves to be viewed figuratively as suggesting one further kind of mirror analogue, because the attitude of Macbeth, as dramatized in the familiar first-act soliloquy, nicely reflects an important elements in the attitudes of Faulkner’s three major protagonists of chaos, Mrs. Compson, Quentin, and Jason. All of these characters have this much in common: each is intent on self-pitying self-justification. All are certain that they have become victimized by circumstances beyond their control, and all of them project outward on life their own inner chaos, which has its roots in a perversion of love,

through self-love. Similarly, in the fifth act, Macbeth is represented as refusing to recognize that he has been in any way to blame, or responsible, for what has happened to him. Instead, he also projects his own inner chaos outward, and to view life itself as a walking 'shadow.' Now consider the ironies of situation implicit in that passage which Faulkner's title suggests as a pertinent mirror of the attitudes not only of Quentin and Jason but also of Mr. and Mrs. Compson: 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow…'

Each of these four structural units, thus contiguous, hinged, set at a different angle from the others, might be called analogous to those hinged and contiguous haberdashery mirrors which permit us to contemplate the immediate picture reflected in any single one of those mirrors, and then to contemplate secondary or subordinate pictures which are reflections of reflections in each of the separate mirrors. In Faulkner's four structural mirrors (the four parts), the first picture (or pictures) may be said to be provided through Ben's reflecting angle of vision. Although the reader's initial impression of Ben's reverie may, indeed, provide a sense that the tale is told by an idiot, signifying nothing, the ultimate impression is that Ben's angle of vision concentrates out attention symbolically on certain basic and primitive powers of perception, available even to an idiot; powers of perception which enable even a severely handicapped individual to create, from his own experience and with the aid of his instincts and intuitions, some forms of order which can give positive values to human experience.

Structurally, the second set of pictures is provided through Quentin's reflecting angle of vision. This time, although the reader's early impression of Quentin's reverie may provide a preliminary sense of a highly sensitive and Hamlet-like character, who views himself as intent on holding up to nature his own idealistic mirror, the ultimate impression is that Quentin's angle of vision reflects, by contrast with Ben's, several important aspects of the negative or obverse side of Faulkner's theme. Psychologically unbalanced by his own inner and outer conflicts, Quentin is represented as being partly responsible not only for what has happened to himself but also for what has happened to some other members of his family. He has permitted the warped and warping ego to invert exactly those basic and primitive and positive values symbolized by that which Ben instinctively and intuitively cherished.

The third set of images is provided by Jason's reflecting angle of vision, and even though Jason sees himself as the only sane Compson, the reader quickly becomes convinced that Jason's sadistic scale of values is more nearly analogous to the values of Iago than to those of the almost Hamlet-like Quentin. The irony of the total situation involving Jason culminates in a ridiculously fine burlesque of poetic justice when Faulkner permits Jason's golden fleece of Caddy to be avenged by Caddy's daughter's golden fleece of Jason. Even as Caddy's brother Quentin has somehow been at least partially responsible for the moral degeneration of Caddy, so Jason is represented as being at least partially responsible for the moral degeneration of Caddy's daughter.

The fourth set of images is provided through Dilsey's reflecting angle of vision. Implicitly and symbolically there is an analogous relationship between Dilsey's emphasis on certain basic, primary, positive values throughout and Ben's intuitive sense of values. Thus, the positive values of vision, mirrored by Ben and Dilsey most sharply in the first and fourth structural parts of *The Sound and the Fury*, may be considered literally and symbolically as bracketing and containing the two negative angles of vision mirrored by Quentin and Jason in the second and third parts. Taken in this sense, the structural arrangement of these four hinged mirrors serves to heighten the reader's awareness of Faulkner's major thematic antithesis between the chaos-producing effects of self-love and the order-producing effects of compassion and self-sacrificial love in human experience."

Lawrance Thompson
"Mirror Analogues in The Sound and the Fury"
English Institute Essays, 1952
(Columbia U 1953) 83-106

"And if the technique Faulkner has adopted seems at first a negation of temporality, the reason is that we confuse temporality with chronology. It was man who invented dates and clocks…. In *The Sound and the Fury* everything has already happened…. Around a few central themes (Caddy's pregnancy, Benjy's castration, Quentin's suicide) gravitate innumerable silent masses. Whence the absurdity of the chronology of 'the assertive and contradictory assurance' of the clock. The order of the past is the order of the heart."

Jean-Paul Sartre
"On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner"
Literary and Philosophical Essays
trans. Annette Michelson
(London: Rider 1955) 79-87

"The structure and content of Faulkner's masterpiece, *The Sound and the Fury,* can be understood only if we grasp his singular absorption with time—or timelessness. On the surface it appears to be a story of the three Compson sons, told to us through their stream of consciousness on three different days. In this process, however, we become acquainted with the decay of the Compson family, and by the same token of the American South. We observe, and are made to feel, the swallowing up of the present by the past…. Quentin destroys himself, in reality because he has been unable to put the present into meaningful relation with the past….

Jason, the Compson who seems at first glance to be completely in touch with reality, deploys a vast surface energy in acting out his hatred of his fellow-men and in hoarding petty sums. His father had urged his sons not to 'spend all your breath' trying to conquer time. Jason is always breathless. He knows only mechanical time; he runs in his little maze and cannot stop running. He is nearly always late, and all the while he strains to be on time. His time-sense is as faulty as Quentin's, but at the opposite extreme. He knows only the inching present, as Quentin knew only an engulfing past. All he achieves is a constant self-frustration. The present has trapped him in a chamber a few city blocks long….

Faulkner boldly violated chronological sequence in *The Sound and the Fury,* perhaps in imitation of the human consciousness itself. The mind cannot accommodate itself to chronological or mechanical time, but is constantly moving blocks of time from past-to-present-to-past, and without regard for logical sequence. In doing this the American novelist showed how completely he had grasped the essential characteristic of the psychological novel…. Only when we have read the entire book is it possible to unscramble the time-element and allow all the data to fall into place in our mind…. In making us aware of the disordered time-sense of real life, that is of psychological time, Faulkner not only dramatized for us the three minds and the confusion of time that exists in memory, but heightened our awareness of the depths of mental experience….

The material of Benjy's consciousness is given to us, if we patiently read our text, in terms of his own perceptions and as they come to him…. His world is the world of stimulus and response; and when certain things happen which have happened before, these melt together. Each memory recalls another and enfolds it, probably to 'trigger' still another…. He is thirteen on one page and thirty-three on the next. It is possible to set down a rough chronology, if one wishes: but to what purpose? The story is supposed to come to us as it happens to Benjy…. In accepting the material in its scrambled state and seeking to understand it, we are invited by Faulkner to place ourselves within the angle of vision or perception of Benjy; we are involved with *point of view*. We are maneuvered by the novelist into taking over all of Benjy's senses: his eyes become our eyes, his sense of smell is ours, his unique experience of the world around him is our experience for the duration of the book….

What Faulkner has achieved in this section has been a significant change in novel-dimension. I refer not only to the technique, nor to the poetry: it is his assimilation in a remarkably intuitive fashion, of the lesson of Joyce and of the French Symbolists: for he shows us how a novelist, or a poet, can use language to evoke more perceptions and feelings than unilinear prose has been hitherto accustomed to doing. We can perhaps make a useful analogy with what the Impressionist painters and the abstractionists have achieved in our time….

Faulkner is busily creating also an illusion of simultaneity: we are hearing, smelling, seeing *at the same time*, as in life. The effect he achieves resembles that of movie-montage where the rapidity of the images, and the sequence in which they come before the eyes, create a multiple activity of the senses and an illusion of things occurring at the same time instead of successively…. It is all illusion, of course: but we have paid our visit through the empathy, artistic sensibility, imaginative construction, and the use of verbal imagery,

with which Faulkner imparts life to his interior vision. This is the remarkable achievement of this book…. His book is a supreme example of a work of art in which technique and substance are one….

Each Compson brother in his own way symbolizes the moral world of Southern Calvinism; but he also symbolizes the way in which family tension and social tension mould an individual. The slowly crumbling gentry, selling their land and cultivating a decorum no longer in tune with their world, can end only by divesting themselves of their patrimony and destroying themselves, either literally, as Quentin did, or through a gradual process of self-undermining, as in Jason. The whining helpless mother, the charming but futile resignedly-philosophical father, are the victims of a stagnation they cannot overcome. Their idiot son, in his eerie world, epitomizes the futility of all their lives. *The Sound and the Fury* as a novel expresses all the moral frustration and questioning of Shakespeare's soliloquy which gives the book its title….

Such a novel is well described as a Symbolist novel, because the entire work is made to symbolize for us consciousness and the South: in giving us the imaged memories and the tortured inner life of a family Faulkner has given us the tortured inner life of a society which this family represents; and in using language evocatively, Faulkner has been able to make that language convey intensities of feeling and states of consciousness which words can never begin to describe…. The novelist's concern is with feeling. The very title implies it. The sound is anguish and the fury is a manifestation of a kind of primordial animal rage: and this book is about the anguish of the innocent and the fury of the frustrated and the damned. These are the larger meanings we can read in this fiction when we have mastered its difficulties. And it is only through such complexities that Faulkner conveys to us the chaos of the Compson world in a fashion closer to human experience than any mere recital of the Compson family history. We come to know it because we have been confronted by intensities of feeling rather than recitals of fact….

The Sound and the Fury is perhaps the most remarkable of contemporary American novels. By its technical resources and symbolic strength Faulkner was enabled to perform in a work of art a great act of empathy—and of humanity."

Leon Edel
The Modern Psychological Novel
(Grosset & Dunlap 1955) 98-101, 164-73, 176

"The non-Emersonian tradition of Hawthorne and Melville prepared the way for Faulkner by introducing the strain of dark and somber drama which characterizes so much of the best American fiction…. The first version of Faulkner's doomed young man is Donald Mahon, the wounded veteran of the 'Lost Generation' novel, *Soldier's Pay*…. But in Quentin Compson we have a fuller representation. Not only does he have the history of his family and of Yoknapatawpha County behind him, so that this is richly felt in whatever he does; but now Faulkner has discovered how to *do* this character. He makes this discovery to a certain extent by reading *Ulysses* and by perceiving the plausibility of modeling Quentin on Stephen Daedalus. The similarities are obvious enough—they are both Hamlet-like young men; they are alienated from yet feel powerfully attached to their homelands; they are preoccupied by time and the symbolic significance of passing episodes in their lives and Stephen Daedalus's idea that 'history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake' express Quentin Compson's own state of mind; both young men are haunted by guilt: Quentin tries to believe he has committed incest with his sister, as Stephen tries to believe he has killed his mother.

Joyce's influence on *The Sound and the Fury,* as every reader must see, affects not only Quentin Compson but the very structure and language of the book. In the first two sections especially, it is not narrative but (as in *Ulysses*) the association of the symbols and ideas that forms the continuity. We soon become aware, as we begin to understand the unconventional technique of *The Sound and the Fury*, that the book contains a fairly sustained if meager narrative of the conventional sort. But it is important to perceive that the action of the book extends beyond the narrative which recounts the dissolution of the Compson family and includes a gradual revelation in detail of a whole culture, a representative episode in history. This revelation like revelations in the novels of James as well as of Joyce, is really itself the main action; it is dramatic; it is 'rendered.' It is not, in other words, merely a by-product of the action; it *is* the action.

The Sound and the Fury meets the Jamesian requirements of drama, 'solidity of specification,' and presentation of characters. The calculated alternation of 'picture' and 'scene,' the dramatic rendition of a way of life, the painting of 'portraits,' the 'rich passion for extremes'—all these elements of the Jamesian novel are present, as the reader easily sees, provided he is not thrown off by the sometimes difficult language and the modernist freedom with chronology. One need not stress the Joycean devices Faulkner uses: the interior monologue and stream of consciousness, the cinematic montage effect, the free, lyric, punning language. These are merely particulars in the complicated conjunction of forces that produced Faulkner's first great book.

What happened to Faulkner is roughly what happened to Melville in writing *Moby-Dick.* Melville discovered simultaneously how to use Shakespeare and how to represent in their fullest meaning the native and personal materials he had been trying to use in his earlier books. Faulkner's simultaneous discovery of Joyce…and of the full significance, as a literary idea, of Yoknapatawpha County is closely analogous to Melville's discoveries. So that *Moby-Dick* and *The Sound and the Fury* are classic examples of the successful union of American with European genius."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 220, 222-24

"*The Sound and the Fury* marks Faulkner's first radical departure from the traditional form of the novel; it is also his most complicated book technically, and one of his most successful artistically. The title is from *Macbeth,* V:5: '…a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' The structure is extremely complex. The story is divided into four sections, each related through the mind of a different character, and there are countless flashbacks and switches in chronology. The 'central time' of the action is 1928, but parts of all four sections take place in 1910. The main characters are Jason and Caroline Compson, heads of the aristocratic but declining Compson clan of Jefferson; Candace (Caddy), their daughter; Benjamin (Benjy), an idiot son; Quentin, the idealistic thinker of the family; Jason, a third son, materialistic and selfish; Dilsey, a self-effacing and intelligent old Negro servant; and Luster, the fourteen-year-old Negro companion and bodyguard of Benjy.

The kernel of the plot is as follows: Caddy is seduced by the worthless Dalton Ames and later married off to an opportunistic Northerner, who abandons her. Quentin, who only half-realizes he is in love with his sister, is filled with shame at her betrayal and finally drowns himself in Cambridge as a sort of expiation. Benjy is at first happy playing in his pasture, but the land is sold to pay Quentin's tuition at Harvard (symbol of the selling-out of the Southern land-holding class to the North). Later his brother Jason obtains legal guardianship over Benjy and has him sterilized (symbol of the extinction of the Southern aristocracy at the hands of materialists); in the end Benjy is put into a state institution. Since the mother is self-centered and helpless, Dilsey presides over the disintegration of the family with loving patience and resignation. This novel makes extensive use of stream-of-consciousness narration, free association, and diffuse location in time."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 213-14

"By presenting events right from the start through the vision of an imbecile—Benjamin Compson opens the dismal round of interior monologues which takes us sinuously through the novel's landscape—Faulkner manifests his intent: to seek out the original substance of man, his very being before it takes form. He deemed it more effective, as he later explains, to tell the story of someone who 'knows only what happens to him, but not why it happens.' More effective, indeed, because it allows us to penetrate Faulkner's notion of man more deeply and with greater surprise. The whimpering, blubbering, and bellowing of the harmless, good-natured idiot give the book not only its gruesome background music, but also its purifying significance. What we hear is the accusation of the unawoken creature against himself and the ill-bred world. In the face of the innate corruption of the human fiber (the 'Compsonistic vulgarity'!), the curse of being, the original sin of existing, is thrust the paralyzing premonition of crude, undrawn forces of love….

Four times the story heaves to a start with a kind of tremendous effort. Yet only when it rebegins for the fourth time does the narrator intercede to recapitulate the story for itself, a story which until now had been presented solely through the minds of its actors. The technique of interior monologues is replaced by a precise, external Realism. The author evokes the outer appearance of things with superb approximation; current reality glows unexpectedly in colors a mere copyist of nature could never find because he sees only the smaller side of the world. A blossoming pear tree; a black staircase with its splash of light from a grey window; an old, unshapen Negro woman clutching a hotwater bottle 'by the neck like a dead hen---how alive these things are!"

Gunter Blocker
"William Faulkner," *Die Neuen Wirklichkeiten*
trans. Jacqueline Merriam
(Argon Verlag 1958) 112-23

"In the Quentin section of *The Sound and the Fury* four powerful word motifs contain the tragic elements of the narrative: *door*, used twenty-five times; *sister*, twenty-nine times; *honeysuckle*, twenty-seven times; and *water*, forty-eight times. These words, embodying the incest theme, the twoo-sweet honeysuckle memories, and the compulsion to death by water, dominate by repetition the movement of the hundred-page section. Add to this the time motifs—*watch*, *clock*, and *chimes*—and Quentin's tragic conflict is complete. By indirection, using these words which simultaneously serve as motifs to lead the reader and as symbols to reveal Quentin's extremely disturbed state, the novelist has achieved masterful control of a complex and highly charged situation. By choosing three words at least (*door*, *sister*, *water*) which have Biblical or psychological associations, he has added to the injected overtones of mythical dimension."

Florence Leaver
"Faulkner: The Word as Principle and Power"
South Atlantic Quarterly
(Autumn 1958) 464-76

"The structure of the novel is clearly reflected in the organization of the events of the evening on which Damuddy dies. These events reveal the typical gestures and reactions of the four children to each other and to the mysterious advent of death…. Within the novel as a whole it is Caddy's surrender to Dalton Ames which serves both as the source of dramatic tension and as the focal point for the various perspectives…. By fixing the structure while leaving the central situation ambiguous, Faulkner forces the reader to reconstruct the story and to apprehend its significance for himself…. As he proceeds from one section to the next, there is a gradual clarification of events, a rounding out of the fragments of scenes and conversations which Benjy reports….

The fact that Benjy is dumb is symbolic of the closed nature of these worlds; communication is impossible when Caddy who is central to all three means something different to each. For Benjy she is the smell of trees; for Quentin, honor; and for Jason, money or at least the means of obtaining it…. Out of the relation that Benjy, Quentin, and Jason bear to Caddy yet another pattern emerges: a gradual progression from the completely closed and private world of the first section to the completely public world of the fourth…. It is in terms of sensation that [Benjy] imposes a very definite order on his experience. Despite the apparent chaos of fragments, Benjy himself lives in a world which is inflexible and rigid. The extent of its inflexibility is indicated by his bellows of protest whether over a wrong turn taken by Luster, Caddy's use of perfume, or her sexual promiscuity….

The fixed route to the graveyard is also sacred; Benjy is overwhelmed with horror and agony when Luster takes the wrong turn only to subside the minute the mistake is corrected…. Within this rigid world Caddy is at once the focus of order and the instrument of its destruction. The pasture, the fire, and sleep, the three things Benjy loves most, are associated with her, as is illustrated by the recurrent phrase 'Caddy smelled like trees,' his refusal to go to sleep without her, and his memory of her during the rainy evening when for a brief moment everything in his world was in its proper place…. The intensity of his reaction is caused by the fact that any alteration in Caddy makes her not-Caddy. Thus, Caddy, as in the Quentin section, is at once identified with the rigid order of Benjy's private world and with the disorder of actual experience. Depending on which of the two is dominant at the moment, Benjy moans or smiles serenely….

Quentin too has constructed for himself a private world to which Caddy is essential, a world which is threatened and finally destroyed by her involvement in circumstance. His hopeless and endless brooding is but Benjy's moan become articulate though not rational. His order, however, is based on emotions rather than sensations, on concepts rather than physical objects. And whereas Benjy is saved by being outside time, Quentin is destroyed by his excessive awareness of it…. Quentin can neither accept nor reconcile himself to that change or to the possibility that a further change may make even his despair a thing of the past, and so he chooses death as a means of escaping the situation….

His fight with Julio, the outraged brother, and with Bland constitute the two points at which past and present, the private and public worlds collide…. In the incident with Bland the past breaks into the present as Quentin's memory of Dalton Ames becomes stronger than the routine responses he is forced to make to Mrs. Bland and her guests. Significantly, in neither case does Quentin offer any resistance to the blows he receives. The order which Quentin had once built around Caddy is as rigid and inflexible as Benjy's and it shares Benjy's fear of change and his expectation that all experience should conform to his pattern. The cause of his ineffectuality and his ultimate destruction is the fact that his system antecedes his experience and eventually is held in defiance of experience. His is an ethical order based on words, on 'fine, dead sounds,' the meaning of which he has yet to learn…. Insofar as virginity is a concept, associated with virtue and honor, it becomes the center of Quentin's world, and since it is also physically present in Caddy, it forms a precarious link between his world and that of experience….

Since his emotional responses center on these concepts, Quentin is quite incapable of love for any human being, even Caddy. Despite his feverish preoccupation with ethics, he is unable to perform any ethical actions himself; even his death is not so much a protest as it is simply a withdrawal. Thus, it is not the time that is out of joint but Quentin's relation to time…. In the long sweep of time Caddy's affair is but one more event, seemingly without reason or significance, providing one more illustration of transience and change in human life. She herself places little importance on the actual Ames affair, although she is concerned with its effect on Quentin, Benjy, and her father. For Quentin, however, it means the complete collapse of his careful ethical structure which he had tried to hold beyond time. Like Benjy's, his reaction is a moan of pain and outrage…

His solution is to make Caddy admit that they have committed incest. In this way he hopes to make Compson honor a thing of importance and momentous significance even as he destroys it. This gesture is in contrast to Caddy's promiscuity which merely slights the honor. Moreover, incest can be used to affirm the validity of his ethical pattern. Quentin has already, in a sense, usurped the role of God by creating a paradise for himself and Caddy isolated from the world through the fact of sexual innocence. Through incest he can convert this paradise into hell, thereby maintaining the same order but in reverse. Sin instead of virtue, punishment instead of bliss, will be made everlasting. The isolation through innocence can become isolation through sin. The incest, however, is as unreal a center for Quentin's hell as his sister's purity was for his paradise. It is significant that he refuses to commit the actual act. Committing incest would destroy his order completely by involving him in the terrible reality of experience. But through a lie he can circumvent experience; like the boys discussing the money they would have received and spent had they caught the fish, he makes 'of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words'….

The heavy, choking fragrance of honeysuckle dramatizes the conflict between his order and the blind forces of nature which constantly threaten to destroy it. Honeysuckle is the rife animality of sex, the incomprehensible and hateful world for which Caddy has abandoned his paradise, and hence it is also the symbol of his defeat. Yet honeysuckle is only a sensation, just as Caddy's affair with Ames is simply a natural event. It is Quentin who makes of the one a symbol of 'night and unrest' and of the other the unforgivable sin. The references to roses have a similar function in that they too are associated with sex, but they are identified with a single scene, that of Caddy's wedding. Therefore, they are at once the symbol of the world he fears and of his irrevocable betrayal by that world. Roses are Caddy's sex, her promiscuity and her 'sin' made socially respectable….

Quentin…attempts to make first Caddy's purity and then her 'sinning' everlasting, and when both attempts fail, he chooses death not so much to terminate time as to arrest it forever at one point…. He sees

himself as the hero of the family drama… Part of his outrage and frustration in connection with Caddy is that neither her husband nor her lover seems worthy, in his eyes, of assuming a role in his world: Herbert is obviously despicable and Ames refuses to act in terms of Quentin's preconceptions….

It is not only Benjy but also Quentin who sees Caddy's wedding reflected in the mirror. Caddy, however, cannot be confined to its surface; she runs out of the mirror and out of his and Benjy's world…. It is significant that he sees only those aspects of Caddy as shadows which he cannot incorporate into his world: it is her love affair and her marriage which he finds perverse, mocking… The same feeling of mockery is present in his insistence that he has tricked his shadow…. The number of times that the shadow images are fused with images of water indicates that death by water is Quentin's way of reconciling his two worlds, of merging shadow and reality and tempering their conflict. Whatever suggestion of purification may be present, water is primarily a symbol of oblivion for Quentin….

Quentin's world is almost as isolated and inflexible as Benjy's, but its order is based on abstractions rather than sensations. While Benjy can comprehend only the physical aspects of his experience, Quentin sees the physical only as a manifestation of ideas. Thus, his section is filled with echoes, both literary and Biblical, phrases, names quoted out of context but falling neatly into the pattern of his thought…. Such names as Jesus, St. Francis, Moses, Washington, and Byron not only add a richness of historical and literary allusions but convey the nature of Quentin's [abstract] world. Into that world Benjy is admitted as 'Benjamin the child of mine old age held hostage into Egypt' and Caddy as Eve or Little Sister Death. Mr. Compson forces an entry not as father or friend but as a voice which can juggle words and ideas while insisting on their emptiness…. These echoes assume the quality of a ritual by which he attempts to conjure experience into conformity with his wishes….

Jason operates in terms of a logic which forms the basis of social communication. We may not approve the direction in which his logic takes him, but that his actions are the results of clear, orderly thinking in terms of cause and effect cannot be disputed…. Since it was because of Caddy that he was deprived not only of his inheritance but of his promised job, his recompense must come from Caddy; and since Miss Quentin was the actual cause of Herbert's displeasure, it is through her that he simultaneously gains his wealth and his revenge. It is part of the general satiric intent of this section that Jason's obvious distortion of Caddy should be associated with logic and reason, for it throws a new perspective not only on the actions of the Compsons but on Jason, the representative of the 'rational' man….

Since Jason reacts logically rather than emotionally, his section offers no barriers to comprehension…. Yet logic, presumably the basis of human communication and hence of society, isolates Jason as effectively as the moral abstractions of Quentin or the complete dependence on sensations of Benjy.… The conviction that he alone has a firm grasp on reality results in a literalism untouched by any hint of qualification in Jason's thinking…. He cannot imagine that there might be other facts, other aspects of the situation, than the ones that directly affect him; as a result, he sees certain things so clearly that all others escape him. In the process logic replaces truth, and law, justice…. He is not concerned with either Caddy or her daughter except as they enter into the pattern of loss and recompense and finally loss again…. This calculating approach to experience pervades his every act, no matter how trivial…. It is on this [legalistic] view that the double irony of Miss Quentin's theft of his thieving hinges….

He has retrieved his losses, suffered because of Caddy, at the expense of Caddy's daughter without actually breaking any law. Caddy is sending money for her daughter's support and the daughter is being supported. Mrs. Compson retains the pleasure of tearing up and burning cheques even while her account at the bank grows. Meanwhile, Jason recovers what he considers to be his own money in a legal though unethical fashion. But with her one unpremeditated act Miss Quentin destroys the work of years; more important, she is as safe from prosecution despite her heedlessness as Jason was because of all his care. Legally, she has only stolen what already belonged to her. When Jason demands an endorsement of his just indignation from the sheriff, the latter refuses to help on the basis of the very letter of the law Jason had so carefully observed. Thus, he is effectively hoisted with his own petard and fairly defeated with his own weapons…. From the first he had distrusted everything which he could not himself control…. The red tie becomes for him the symbol of the irrational, the antithesis of his own careful logic….

Like Benjy, he violently protests his loss, but, also like Benjy's, his order remains intact despite the loss of certain elements. Always the practical man, Jason cuts his losses and continues in exactly the same way, discharging his obligations to the letter, slowly accumulating money for another strong box… Jason is the last of the Compson line and a childless bachelor. That very childlessness is another indication of his deliberate rejection of any relationship which he cannot control, especially one in which emotions dominate logic and trust replaces contracts….

In the last section we finally emerge from the closed world of the Compson Mile into the public world as represented by Jefferson…. In this section Dilsey emerges not only as a Negro servant in the Compson household but as a human being…. Various contrasts between Dilsey and the others are delineated with striking clarity…. Dilsey, almost as inarticulate as Benjy, becomes through her actions alone the embodiment of the truth of the heart which is synonymous with morality. The acceptance of whatever time brings, the absence of questioning and petty protests, enables her to create order out of circumstance rather than in defiance of it, and in so doing she gains both dignity and significance for her life. In a sense, Dilsey represents a final perspective directed toward the past and the Compsons, but it is also the reader's perspective for which Dilsey merely provides the vantage point. This fact suggests another reason for the objective narration in this section: to use Dilsey as a point of view character would be to destroy her efficacy as the ethical norm, for that would give us but one more splinter of the truth confined and conditioned by the mind which grasped it….

She is the only one who challenges [Jason] in the household, who defends the absent Caddy, Miss Quentin, Benjy, and even Luster from his anger. But more important, she challenges the validity and efficacy of his world by a passive and irrational resistance to which he has no counter. That someone should work without pay is so foreign to his system that he is helpless in the face of it. There is no doubt but that Dilsey is meant to represent the ethical norm, the realizing and acting out of one's humanity; it is from this that the Compsons have deviated, each into his separate world. The mother and her two elder sons have abandoned their humanity for the sake of pride or vanity or self-pity. Both Benjy and Caddy are tests of the family's humanity… Both challenge the family's capacity for understanding and forgiveness and the family fails both….

Dilsey's attitude, as she lives it, is formed by her instinctive feeling that whatever happens must be met with courage and dignity in which there is no room for passivity or pessimism. Her ability to stand steadfast without faltering in the face of circumstance finds further expression in her patient preoccupation with the present… At no time does Dilsey judge any of the Compsons, not even Jason, though she does object at one point to those who frown on Benjy's presence in a Negro church. But her presence enables the reader to judge not systems but actions and hence to grasp the truth instinctively….

The Reverend Shegog begins using the magic of his voice. When he concludes, communication has been replaced by communion in which each member loses his identity but finds his humanity and the knowledge that all men are equal and brothers in their suffering…. The splinters of truth presented in the first three sections reverberate with the sound and fury signifying nothing. But out of those same events, the same disorder and confusion, come Dilsey's triumph and her peace, lending significance not only to her own life but to the book as a whole."

Olga W. Vickery
The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation
(Louisiana State 1959, 1964) 28-49

"One of the finest passages in this mode [authorial silence] is the Jason section of *The Sound and the Fury.* Though our path through Jason's perverted moral world is clarified in many ways by what has come before, essentially it is built out of secret jokes passing between ourselves and the author. As we find ourselves viewing everything in a light contrary to that thrown by Jason's own beclouded soul, we may come to feel that any commentary will taint the pure effect: "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say…' As we go on through this catalogue of bigotry, crime, cruelty and ignorance, few of us would ask for commentary to clarify our judgment. It is not only that we need no guide. We would positively repudiate one if he offered himself to us. We take delight in communion, and even in deep collusion, with the author behind Jason's back.

Most of Jason's faults and crimes are so glaring that there would be no fun in talking about them openly. In fact, one of the frustrations of criticism is that many of the effects that require explication are of a kind that lose their savor in being made explicit. Their authors left them implicit in the first place because open discussion threatened to destroy them. To call Jason a bigot, a braggart, a thief, and a sadist offers none of the comic delight that his vicious behavior offers. But to commune with Faulkner behind Jason's back is a different matter. We watch with him while this Vice reveals himself for our contempt, our hatred, our laughter, and even—so strong is the effect of his psychological vitality—our pity. The technique enables us to skirt the thrilling regions of melodrama without embarrassment. Breathing the heady airs of irony, we can ignore how close we have come to gothic fantasy.

What all this amounts to is that on this moral level we discover a kind of collaboration which can be one of the most rewarding of all reading experiences. To collaborate with the author by providing the source of an allusion or by deciphering a pun is one thing. But to collaborate with him by providing mature moral judgment is a far more exhilarating sport. In dealing with Jason, we must help Faulkner write his work by rising to our best, most perceptive level. When we see the compound joke of Jason's not having anything against 'jews as an individual' but just against 'the race,' we do so only by calling to bear on the passage our linguistic experience, our logical and moral sense, and our past experience with bigots. When we have seen all that Faulkner has packed into the sentence we feel almost as if we had written it ourselves, so effectively has he demanded of us our best creative effort."

Wayne C. Booth
The Rhetoric of Fiction
(U Chicago 1961) 306-08

"Faulkner's fourth novel, his first radical experiment in form and technique, is one of his most successful works. Three of the book's four sections are interior monologues of the three Compson brothers, who, with their hypochondriac mother and their vanished sister Caddy, are the sole surviving members of a decaying aristocratic family in Mississippi. The first section, seen through the eyes of the idiot Benjy, is literally 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.' The second follows the thoughts of Quentin, a Harvard student whose world, built on a dying view of family honor and on his abnormally close ties to his sister Caddy, has been shattered by her seduction and hasty, loveless marriage. In their cryptic, often confusing changes of period, these two sections reflect respectively the disorder and the hypersensitivity of their protagonists' minds.

The third section is related in straightforward language by greedy, petty-minded Jason, who has kept for himself the money Caddy has been sending for the support of her illegitimate daughter Quentin. Quentin manages to steal it back and runs off with a traveling carnival performer. The final section is a third-person narrative focused on Dilsey, the Negro cook, whose patience and compassion are implicitly contrasted with the self-absorption and self-destructiveness of the Compsons."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1060

"The form of *The Sound and the Fury* is in fact inseparable from its matter—the decay and fall of the house of Jason Compson. Faulkner remarked to a writing class in 1931 that he ever worried about problems of technique, and more recently has explained that he rewrote his 'story' four times, the initial idea being the image of a little girl's dam and muddied panties as she looks from a tree through a window and reports to her siblings what she sees in the room of her dying grandmother. In whatever sense one takes the idea of 'rewriting,' the finished work is Faulkner's finest and most unified performance. Though he permits his point-of-view characters—Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey—to move freely backward in their memory of events, he pins each of the four sections to a single day: April 7, 1928; June 2, 1910; April 6, 1928; and April 8, 1928.

The first of these is the thirty-third birthday of the idiot Benjy; so apparently full of sound and fury, signifying little or nothing, the opening section is actually a kaleidoscopic revelation of the key events and relations in the history of the Compson family. Benjy has no words, only moaning and bellowing, to express pain and loss and grief. Yet Faulkner with extraordinary virtuosity permits Benjy to render pictures

and sensations and to reveal his love for his sister Candace, his brother Quentin, his father Jason, his niece Quentin (Caddy's daughter), and his guardians Dilsey and her child Luster. He associates firelight and the former pasture and the smell of trees and rain with those he loves. The neurasthenic mother and the detestable brother, Jason IV, are sketched with the same economy: Mrs. Compson, by her having changed the name of her child from Maury to Benjamin when it became apparent that he was an idiot, and by the 'vivid dead smell of perfume"—Jason IV by his constant tattling on the other children and his cutting up Benjy's paper dolls. The source of Benjy's unassuageable grief is Caddy's marriage. At the time she is pregnant with another man's child. This climax of her promiscuity is represented for the reader by Benjy's discovery that his sister no longer smells like trees. In a story where Benjy is imprisoned by idiocy, Caddy damned by sexuality, the parents enfeebled by hypochondria and whisky, and Jason IV rendered despicable by greed and hared, only Dilsey, the Negro servant who holds the family together affords a distinct moral center.

But the second part of the novel, reflected from the mind of Quentin in Cambridge, Massachusetts, throughout the day of June 2, 1910, before he drowns himself in the Charles River, deals most directly and most consciously with the major themes of the novel, so that Quentin tends to assume central importance… With none of the Christian belief that sustains Dilsey, and unable to honor his parents, Quentin has attempted to live by two concepts, his sister Caddy's honor and eternal punishment, so that if he could bring himself to commit incest with Caddy, or to kill her and then himself, they might suffer the damnation of Paolo and Francesca. The first effort is wrecked by Caddy's promiscuity and her hasty marriage, the second by a failure of nerve and a crumbling of all beliefs, so that nothing remains for Quentin but suicide.

The third section, rendered by Jason Compson IV, is bitter comedy, which ends with the only 'normal' Compson standing self-revealed as speculator, bully, coward, and thief—the man who has had his brother Benjy gelded and who pockets the monthly check that Caddy sends to support her daughter, Quentin. In the fourth section Faulkner himself narrates the defeat of Jason IV in Jason's discovery that Quentin, his niece, has run off with a pitchman from the circus, taking not only the money he had been stealing from he mother, but5 his own savings as well.

In profound contrast, while Jason is attempting in impotent rage to recover the money from Quentin, Dilsey, with Benjy and Luster, is listening quietly to an Easter sermon on the Resurrection (this brief sermon of the 'Rev'un Shegog' in vernacular language, simple and austere, bears comparison with Father Mapple's sermon in *Moby-Dick*) and coming to the realization that she has seen 'de first and de last' of the Compsons. The novel concludes, as it had begun, with Benjy, and an image that had long teased Faulkner's imagination: an idiot first bellowing in pain because of a change in his narrow life of routine, then again happy because 'cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right; post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place."

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 726-27

"The most skillful use of the subconscious is to be found in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Less 'literary' in tone than *Ulysses,* it is a more successful adaptation of states of consciousness to narrative purpose. This is partly because Faulkner directs his narrative very clearly in terms of a limited number of perspectives and facts. The central fact is the defection of Candace Compson. The novel is developed according to the four principal judgments of the act, in terms of her sin against moral, family, economic, and traditional proprieties. Faulkner presents the sin and its consequences through the minds of Caddy's three brothers, and finally in terms of the *public* world—the world of Jefferson itself, of the shrunken Compson estate, and of the moral and religious judgment of Dilsey, the Negro servant.

The perspective of the idiot brother Benjy is the most extreme of the four, but only because Faulkner must here articulate and give intelligible form to a mind that neither verbalizes nor discriminates past from present. Benjy's mind works through simple association and the identity of events that bear similarities, however widely separated in time. Since he does not know time, he cannot understand or tolerate change; his insights into Caddy's nature have therefore all been settled at a time before Caddy sinned. His is the moral order of an age of innocence; and that order is rigidly and eloquently upheld in his every response.

He reacts by bellowing or whimpering to any suggestion—sight, smell, or movement—that the time of innocence has been changed in the slightest particular. He does not judge persons and acts in terms of a moral order arrived at by reason; he senses disorder, smells out evil, is sensitive to every threat to the family structure.

Like Benjy, Quentin is a monitor of Caddy's moral life. But Quentin's private world—to which Caddy is as essential as she is to Benjy's—is the product of obsessive formulation, ratiocination, conceptualizing. The world of the past is brought back by sensuous images of Caddy as a little girl; but Quentin's memory of the past is not the simple familiar order Benjy has seen. He fixes it in terms of concepts of honor and virginity. For him, virginity is a condition of stasis, in which 'nothing has happened,' and if nothing has happened he can retain his moral design. Caddy's sin has destroyed this design; she has 'made things happen' in losing her virginity, in marrying, in giving birth to an illegitimate child. Quentin tries to recover the design—first by an attempt on the life of her first lover, then by trying to fix the blame for the act on himself (incest, by confining the sin, will at least make guilt and atonement possible within the design), finally by committing suicide. He tries to defeat time through death and thus to fix permanently his conceptions of family and personal honor. This is another kind of consciousness, and Faulkner gives it a style and vocabulary quite different from Benjy's. Benjy exists below the level of articulation; Quentin's mind is given excessively to abstracting and codifying, until he drives himself to the ultimate act of abstraction, death by suicide.

Jason's consciousness is totally different from that of either of his brothers. For Benjy, Caddy's sin is a violation of a world of sensation, for Quentin, loss of honor; for Jason it is a breach of contract, a legal matter for which legal restitution must be made. The section devoted to his view is liberally supplied with references to money, checks, agreements, investments, profit and loss. Jason is the comically rational character who lives in a common-sense world of calculated facts and figures. He is defeated on a legal technicality; in attempting to recover his 'birthright,' he appropriates money intended for Caddy's illegitimate daughter, who takes both it and Jason's other savings and escapes with a man from a traveling carnival. His rational world is in the end defeated by the irrational world, which he has never allowed for in his plans.

The prose of these three appraisals follows strictly the requirements of the narrative; there is no display of stylistics for their own sake, no overstepping the bounds of each consciousness. Faulkner neither exploits the unconscious mind for sensational effects nor imposes extraneous matters upon it. The reader is made ready, through the three private reconstructions of the novel's central event, for the final perspective upon the Compsons. It is the external world, the world of the present, as contrasted with Benjy's and Quentin's fixed pasts. Temporally this world is Easter Sunday, 1928, some thirty years after the significant moment of the past; spatially it is reduced to the now small and aging house, actually to Dilsey's kitchen, which is the only place where any genuine living takes place. The reader discovers, finally, that the affairs of the Compson family are not to be judged by any one of the three previous perspectives, but to be evaluated in the somber tones of an old Negro servant, who emerges from her cabin on a wet morning, her skeleton 'draped loosely in unpadded skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed.

The Sound and the Fury is a remarkably mature and restrained experiment with the possibilities of 'stream-of-consciousness' techniques. Other experimental writing in the decade did not have such successful results. Experiment in so new a thing as the exploration of human consciousness on its own terms was handicapped by love of experiment for its own sake; the excitement of innovation was quite often the only incentive. Joyce testified to the brilliant range of improvisation possible in fictional prose, and Faulkner to the sound usefulness of exploring human states and presenting them with insight and depth."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(1949; Viking/Collier 1962) 247-49

The plot of *The Sound and the Fury* is presented in terms of the lives of the four children of the Compson family, a once respectable and proud Mississippi family that is in its last stages of decay. This

process of decay is symbolized by the gradual vanishing of 'The Copson domain,' originally a choice square mile of land with its 'slave quarters and stables and kitchen gardens and the formal lawns and promenades and pavilions laid out by the same architect who built the columned porticoed house furnished by steamboat from France and New Orleans….' The process of decay is dramatized by the story of the destruction of the children, Benjy, Quentin III, Candace (Caddy), and Jason IV. Since the destruction, except with Jason, is an inner one, the drama presenting the destruction, except the part that deals with Jason, has as its setting the psyches of the characters.

The problems of time unity and scenic arrangement are, of course, closely worked out in relation to this action unity or plot. It is complex. The first section of the novel is labeled 'April 7, 1928.' That is the date that stands for the 'now' of this scene. The setting is the mind of the idiot, Benjy, who in 1928 is thirty-three years old, but whose mental age is three. Benjy's consciousness follows the same laws of movement and association that other consciousnesses do, except perhaps it moves with greater fluidity. Thus the 'present' in his mind moves freely through the past years of his life, so that there is to his consciousness, more than to that of anyone else in fiction, a quality of flux.

This section of the novel, then, has to be considered on two levels: that of the events of the day, April 7, 1928, and that of the past events in the life of Benjy. The events of the 'present' concern what happens to Benjy and to his keeper, the Negro boy, Luster. The accomplishment on this level is presentation of a subtheme centered on the Negro-white relationship, a corollary to the main theme of Compson degeneracy. The materials of the past are the important ones here for purposes of plot. Benjy's psychic character is dramatized and the crucial past events and personages (especially Candace) in the Compson family history are presented from the point of view of the simple, but strangely lucid idiot.

Faulkner tells us, 'Benjy loved three things: The pasture which was sold to pay for Candace's wedding and to send Quentin to Harvard, his sister Candace, firelight.' Since Benjy's love is uniquely persistent and unwavering, these three things, and little else, form the materials of his consciousness. The narrative significance of this lies in the fact that 'the pasture' is a metonymy for the vanishing Compson domain, the central symbol of the novel; 'Candace' is the only one of the Compson children whose consciousness is not directly presented, so that she is dealt with as a character in this indirect way; and 'firelight' is a vital symbol for the exceptional insight of the idiot. This insight gives the materials of Benjy's consciousness a certain weight of authority in relation to the whole novel, in spite of his idiocy. It is by this concentration on three basic subjects in Benjy's mind that not only is it possible for a reader to grasp what is going on, but it is also possible for him to become grounded in the materials of the plot.

The second episode of the novel is entitled 'June 2, 1910.' The external setting is Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the title date; the plot is concerned with Quentin's preparation for suicide. The internal setting is Quentin's mind, which, like Benjy's, flows freely in the past. The plot here is a supplement to the main plot of the novel, which was sketched in the opening section. Quentin, although he is intelligent, is extremely unstable psychologically , so that he, even more than Benjy, is obsessed; and, like Benjy, his sister Candace is the object of his obsession. Thus the development of Candace's character and her role in the broad scheme of things is again advanced. The brotherly concern, in this instance, is incestuous, but it is not physical; it is symbolic for Quentin, 'who loved not his sister's body, but some concept of Compson honor.' The incestuous relation becomes a symbol itself related to the main plot and to the theme of the whole novel.

The third and the last section are labeled 'April 6, 1928,' and 'April 8, 1928,' respectively, which, it will be noted, are the day before and the day after the opening episode. The primary method of the first of these sections is not internal monologue as was that of the two previous ones, but it is soliloquy on a surface, communicating level. It concerns the fourth and youngest of the Compson children, Jason IV. Because chiefly the surface narrative is unfolding here, the time element is fairly static. The same is true of the last section, except that an even more conventional method is used, that of the omniscient third person narrator. Jason's role in the drama of the degeneration of the Compson family is properly the last one treated because it is climactic; that is, his degeneration is the ultimate one. Although he is the only sane one of the brothers, his degeneracy is greater because it involves a break with Compson standards of integrity. Robert Penn Warren has noted this in his remarks on Faulkner. He says of Jason: '…there is no one who can be

compared in degradation and vileness to Jason of *The Sound and the Fury,* the Compson who has embraced Snopesism. In fact, Popeye and Flem, Faulkner's best advertised villains, cannot, for vileness and ultimate meanness, touch Jason.

Jason's conflict is with two persons (his father is dead and so is his brother Quentin, the two chief upholders of Compson honor): Dilsey, the old Negro cook who understands Compson honor, at least in its externals, and Miss Quentin, Candace's illegitimate daughter. Miss Quentin lives with the Compsons, but she doesn't understand (or care for) the Compson code. She represents a deliberate animality foreign to all Compsons—even to Jason. Jason's defeat is by Miss Quentin, not by Dilsey. Symbolically, the Compson line is ended with Jason's defeat (he leaves no heir), and Quentin's suicide (he never cohabits, except imaginatively and symbolically with his sister). Benjy, of course, is gelded and is finally committed to the State Asylum. This story parallels the defeat of the Sutpen dynasty in *Absalom, Absalom!*

It is by this complicated, but organic, use of plot, time unity, scenic arrangement, and symbolic frame that Faulkner achieves a pattern of structural unity in *The Sound and the Fury.* In addition, he makes interesting use of motifs to aid in the binding together of these other structural elements. Faulkner's particular use of motifs can be found in either of the first two sections of the novel. It will be sufficient for illustration to examine but one of them. In the second episode, which contains Quentin's monologue, the motifs are chiefly symbol-motifs, although there are some image-motifs also. The word-motif is not used frequently by Faulkner, who does not, like Joyce, 'equate words with things.'

The chief motifs are the watch, the wedding announcement, the pasture, the chimes, the images of tidying up, and the word 'sister.' In a previous chapter dealing with the privacy of associations, it was shown that these things reappear in Quentin's consciousness. They recur constantly as signals, not only to Quentin's mind, but to the reader's as well. These motifs carry the main weight of the plot, and they are the means by which universal and coherent meaning is distilled from private and chaotic meaning. For example, the watch, which often appears as an object of Quentin's attention, is the watch Quentin's father presented to him. Quentin denudes it of its hands in order to prove to himself that his father's theory is valid: that is purpose is '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.' The click of the watch, which doesn't tell time but only tells that time is always passing, is emphasized by the various clocks—Quentin always refuses to look at them—that impinge on Quentin's consciousness. These watch and clock references support two important ideas related to the main theme: one is the disjuncture of consciousness while it is coping with psychological versus calendar time; the other is the more general idea of decay in time.

It is not necessary for our purpose to show the manner in which all of these motifs are used in the novel. One of them, however, is particularly instructive as an example of manner of utilizing motif that is found generally throughout Faulkner's writing. This is the narrative imagery that has to do with Quentin's concern with his appearance before he commits suicide. He is depicted as washing his hands, cleaning his tie with gasoline, brushing his teeth, and brushing his hat, before he leaves his room finally to go to the river. Of course Faulkner has to have him doing something in order to give a focus to the processes of his consciousness. The symbolic value of this particular imagery, which because it recurs so frequently takes on the status of motif, is great. It may be considered the final and feeble act of cleaning up Compson disgrace and dishonor; a purgative attempt on Quentin's part to erase the stain Candace has put on his psyche. It comes as a preparation for the climax of the episode, the suicide itself, which is likewise an act of atonement."

Robert Humphrey
Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel
(U California, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1962) 104-111

"*The Sound and the Fury* challenged critical skill as no other modern American novel had thus far done. Reviewers were quick to see the exceptional uses to which Faulkner had put the stream-of-consciousness technique, and not unwilling to suspect that the novel was a work of extraordinary talent. L. A. G. Strong, from the beginning an ardent Faulkner supporter, said of this novel (*Spectator,* April 25, 1931) that its difficulty is worth mastering, since the method is indispensable to the effect needed. Henry Nash Smith (*Southwest Review,* Autumn, 1929) agreed, and added that Faulkner had been able to combine a study of

provincial life with certain important universal overtones. The refrain of reviewers seemed generally to applaud the method both in spite of and because of its difficulty.

But there were several exceptions: Francis L. Robbins, for example (*Outlook and Independent,* October 16, 1929), who complained that the novel betrayed a regrettable distrust of 'familiar values' and that the 'subjective analysis' weakened a potentially great theme. The London *Times Literary Supplement* (May 14, 1931) saw little but 'skill' overcome by a concern with 'pathological delinquency.' *The Sound and the Fury* can be credited with beginning the serious general concern over Faulkner as an artist. Even those reviewers, like Thompson and Hicks, who had scarcely been willing to grant him distinction, admitted to admiration for the formal experiment. Evelyn Scott's pamphlet study of the novel, published in the same year as the novel (1929), was the first extended analysis of the form and point of view of a Faulkner work and was in that sense a landmark in Faulkner criticism."

Frederick J. Hoffman
Introduction
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 16-17

"The salient technical feature of *The Sound and the Fury* is the use of four different points of view in the presentation of the breakup of the Compson family…. Part of the sense of enlightenment comes simply from the fact that we are traversing the same territory in circling movements, and the cumulative effect of names and characterizations begins to dramatize for us with compelling urgency a situation we have come to accept almost as our own…. Rarely has a novel appeared so completely disordered and unconnected and accidental in its concreteness…. It is tempting to read it as a parable of the disintegration of modern man. Individuals no longer sustained by familial and cultural unity are alienated and lost in private worlds….

The curse upon Quentin and the rest of the Compsons is the presence of their hypochondriac, whimpering mother….who is sensitive about the social status of her own family, the Bascombs, who feels the birth of an idiot son as a kind of personal affront, who spoils and corrupts her favorite son [Jason]. And who withholds any real love and affection from her other children and her husband…. She is certainly at the root of Quentin's lack of confidence in himself and his inverted pride…. Quentin reveals his Puritanism most obviously in his alarm at the breakdown of sexual morality….Though his father seems to have counseled acquiescence in the meaninglessness of existence, it is plain that it was from him that Quentin derived his high notion of the claims of honor. Quentin has not the slightest doubt as to what he ought to do: he ought to drive Caddy's seducer out of town, and if the seducer refuses to go, he ought to shoot him. But Quentin is not up to the heroic role. He tries, but he cannot even hurt Ames, much less kill him…. Benjy's idiocy and Quentin's quixotic madness are finally less inhuman than Jason's sanity….

Jason is rarely at a loss, and he is so self-righteous in his bitterness than many of his comments carry a kind of nasty conviction…. Faulkner, to be sure, does not sentimentalize Quentin [the daughter of Caddy]. He does not minimize her shortcomings or imply that she was the mere victim of her environment, but his bitterest judgment upon Jason and what Jason's cruelty entailed is in his presentation of what Jason has caused Caddy's baby to become…. In contrast to Mrs. Compson's vanity and whining self-pity, Dilsey exhibits charity and rugged good sense…. In general, Faulkner's Negro characters show less false pride, less false idealism, and more seasoned discipline in human relationships. Dilsey's race has also had something to do with keeping her close to a world still informed by religion…. The Compson family—whatever may be true of the white community at large in the Jefferson of 1910—has lost its religion…. Once Jason is out of the house on his way to the sheriff's, we follow Dilsey and Benjy to church for the Easter service, in which Dilsey finds her exaltation, is counterpointed against Jason's attempt to find his niece and retrieve the money."

Cleanth Brooks
William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country
(Yale 1963) 325-48

"*The Sound and the Fury,* the major document of the Compson family, has no plot in the sense of sustained development of action following in a cause and effect manner. In four sections it deals with certain happenings within the family over a period of about thirty years. The first section, which takes

place on Holy Saturday, 1928, focuses on the sense impressions of Benjy, an idiot of thirty-three. In the second, Quentin, Benjy's elder brother, lives through a day at Harvard, June 2, 1910. The third is seen through the eyes of Jason, two years Benjy's senior, on Good Friday, 1928. The fourth and final section, narrated objectively by the author, presents the household as it exists on Easter Sunday, 1928, but focuses on Dilsey and Jason….

CHARACTERS

Jason Compson III, *father of the four Compson children*
Caroline Bascomb Compson, *his wife*
Maury Bascomb, *her brother*
Quentin Compson III [1889-1910], *eldest son*
Candace [Caddy] Compson [1891-], *eldest daughter*
Jason Compson IV [1893-], *second son*
Benjy Compson [1895-1935?], *youngest son, an idiot*

Dilsey, *the Compson's Negro cook*
Frony, *Dilsey's daughter*
Luster, *Frony's son and Benjy's nurse boy*
T.P., *a Negro boy, an earlier nurse boy of Benjy*
Versh, *A Negro, Benjy's first nurse boy*
Shreve McCannon, *Quentin's roommate at Harvard*
Gerald Bland, *another Harvard student*
Dalton Ames, *the seducer of Caddy and father of her daughter Quentin*
Sydney Herbert Head, *Caddy's first husband, an Indiana banker*
Damuddy, *the Compson children's grandmother, who dies*

The Compson family, which could claim a one-time governor of Mississippi (Quentin II) and a Civil War brigadier general (Jason II), among its ancestors, had, by the beginning of the twentieth century, fallen into decay. Jason Compson III, the father of the four central characters in the novel, was trained as a lawyer but gradually let his practice fall off and slipped gently into dipsomania. A basically uncritical, detached man, he now spends his time sitting in his old office or on the porch of the Compson house reading the Latin poets and making up satiric Latin verses about the local townfolk. His wife, nee Caroline Bascomb, a neurotic, complaining woman, strives to maintain pretensions of gentility despite the decline of the family fortunes. She has very little love for any of her children except Jason IV, whom she considers her only 'true' son, since in personality he is a Bascomb rather than a Compson. Her alcoholic and irresponsible brother Maury sponges off the entire household.

SECTION I: APRIL 7, 1928

This section is a recreation of experience as perceived by Benjy, an idiot, and is written in a stream-of-consciousness technique. Benjy reports both what he sees and what he remembers, without comment and without understanding its significance. Present events evoke memories by association, in no logical sequence; they enter his consciousness and are recorded as if they were occurring at the moment. Time, for Benjy, does not exist. For this reason, his section of the novel is sometimes difficult to follow. Some of the time shifts in Benjy's consciousness are indicated by passages in italics; these sometimes constitute a whole episode, at other times only introduce a part of a longer scene.

PRESENT EVENTS IN SECTION I

It is the day before Easter and Benjy's thirty-third birthday; a traveling carnival is in town. Benjy's Negro nurse boy, Luster, takes him out by the fence of the golf links while Luster hunts for a quarter given to him the night before by his mother; without the quarter Luster cannot go to the carnival. The gold course takes up much of the old Compson pasture which Benjy loved and which Mr. Compson sold in 1909 to pay for Quentin's year at Harvard. Luster and Benjy wander down to the creek branch, where Luster meets and talks with a group of unnamed Negro friends. Luster and Benjy then go back to the house, where Benjy spies Quentin (Caddy's daughter) sitting on the porch swing with a carnival man who wears a red tie.

Luster takes Benjy back to the pasture, where Luster tries to sell a golfer a golf ball for a quarter. The man takes the ball without paying him. Then Luster takes away Benjy's jimson weed and upsets the bottles of flowers in Benjy's 'graveyard.' They go into the house and Dilsey, Luster's grandmother, gives Benjy his birthday cake. In the kitchen, Benjy, who is fascinated by fire, puts his hand in the fire and burns himself. Supper is prepared. Luster begs Jason for a quarter, which Jason refuses. During dinner Jason and Quentin quarrel. Luster puts Benjy to bed and they watch Quentin climbing down the pear tree by her window.

ALTERNATIONS BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

As Luster and Benjy go through the fence to the golf course, Benjy snags himself on a nail and remembers a similar experience in the past: '*Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through.'* About a dozen lines following are also in italics, indicating that Benjy's mind is reliving a past experience. The incidents of the following page and a half (not italicized) are a second memory recalled by the first, as the first was recalled by present occurrence. It ends with *'Keep your hands in your* pockets*, Caddy said. Or they'll get froze.'* From this scene to Benjy's memory of another time associated with cold is an easy transition: 'It's cold out there,' Versh said. 'You don't want to go out doors.' The idea of cold forms the link, in Benjy's mind, between the two memories. The reader is given an additional clue to the time by the reference to Versh, Benjy's first nurse boy.

The next italicized segment indicates present time. Luster interrupts Benjy's memories by speaking to him, but Benjy soon slips back into his memory, and the two pages that follow continue Benjy's memories of the cold winter day, Versh, and Caddy as a child coming home from school. As Versh is associated with the period from 1898, another nurse boy, named T. P., is associated with the time after 1910. When Luster (in italics) mentions the carriage house, Benjy recalls the period shortly after the death of Mr. Compson in 1912 when the family, with Benjy, took the carriage and drove once a week to the cemetery with flowers for the grave. Luster takes Benjy into the barn; it again reminds him of the winter day when Caddy had unsnagged him from the fence, and he continues his recollection of that day.

The reader should pay careful attention to the key words (such as 'cold,' 'barn,' later 'flowers,' and many others) that form the links between Benjy's memories or between present and past. Benjy's age and the approximate time of the events he remembers is always indicated by various references: the name of Benjy's then-current nurse boy, an incident (such as Damuddy's death or Caddy's wedding), or the age of another character… Benjy loves three things: Caddy, the pasture sold to the golf course, and fire. Caddy—that is, the Caddy of his childhood, who 'smells like trees' and whose image remains clear and unchanging in his mind—is the stable center of Benjy's world. When she was present, he resisted the slightest external alteration in her, objecting with a wail when she wore perfume and no longer smelled like trees. Now that she is gone, he experiences a vague feeling of loss and cries at the mention of her name, but her memory is as real to him as her presence formerly was. Benjy's world is ordered, static, and timeless; any external event that threatens this order is greeted with an outraged howl, as when Luster drives to the left instead of the accustomed right of the Confederate monument in the town square of Jefferson.

SECTION II: JUNE 2, 1920

Since Benjy remembers only what he sees and hears, we must assume that his section of the novel, however incoherent, is factually accurate. Quentin's section, on the other hand, is told in the words and through the perceptions of a highly articulate, morbidly sensitive young man. It is sometimes not clear what he remembers and what he imagines. Like Benjy, Quentin is most concerned with Caddy—specifically, with her loss of virginity. Unlike Benjy, for whom time does not exist, Quentin is obsessed with time, as is evident by his constant references to clocks. By breaking his watch he tries to destroy time, but the watch, though mangled and smeared with his blood, refuses to stop ticking. Quentin is concerned with time on the day of his narrative primarily because he is planning to commit suicide in order to escape from time forever. As in Benjy's section, shifts in time are [usually] indicated by italics. Many of the long memory passages are only recognizable by their lack of any punctuation at all.

PRESENT EVENTS IN SECTION II

Quentin awakens in his dormitory room at Harvard. He breaks the watch his father had given him, cuts himself on the broken crystal, packs his trunk, bathes and shaves, and is (deliberately) late for class. He goes out, has breakfast, takes his broken watch to a jeweler, but does not leave it; fascinated by the unwound clocks in the window, he asks the jeweler if any of them tell the right time. He then goes to a hardware store and buys a pair of flatirons. He boards a streetcar and gets off near the river, where he watches the water, on which a fellow student named Gerald Bland is sculling. He meets an old Negro porter named Deacon and gives him a letter to be delivered to his roommate, Shreve, the following day. He goes to the post office, meets Shreve, and gets on another trolley; getting off, he walks along the road until he comes to a bridge, where he meets and talks with three boys who are fishing.

Then he goes to a bakery and buys some buns and meets a little Italian girl, who follows him; he tries to take her home, but she either will not or cannot tell him where she lives. He looks vainly for Anse, the local constable, to turn the girl over to him. Finally Anse and the girl's brother, Julio, find Quentin and accuse him of kidnapping the child. Quentin is saved from the hysterical Julio by the appearance of a car containing two girls, Shreve, Gerald, Mrs. Bland, and Spoade, another student. With the Blands' party, Quentin goes on a picnic, where, apparently for no reason, he attacks Gerald and is badly beaten. He leaves the picnic, walks back along the river and gets a trolley, then returns to his room. He takes off his clothes, bloody from his fight with Gerald, sponges out the stains with gasoline, and goes out again.

These are the literal, physical 'facts' of Quentin's day—seemingly trivial, unrelated to any particular focal point, and lacking in meaning. Their meaning becomes clear in the context of Quentin's thoughts which, from the beginning, are concerned with three things: time—which will not stop—sisters, and virginity. Quentin's disjointed thoughts are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that begin to fall into place as his day continues. Gradually his reveries supply more facts, giving coherence to details that had previously seemed meaningless. We learn, for instance, that Dalton Ames, whose name Quentin frequently repeats, was Caddy's seducer; that Quentin had once tried to avenge Caddy's honor by fighting with Ames, but failed miserably and fainted; that in his unprovoked attack on Gerald, Quentin, obsessed with his memories, was reliving this fight with Ames; that Caddy had met Sydney Herbert Head (whom she married and whom Quentin, with reason, detests) while vacationing with her mother at French Lick, Indiana; and that Quentin has tried to convince his father that he had committed incest with Caddy. Quentin commits suicide shortly after his narrative ends; the many references to water, the notes he leaves, and the flatirons he buys (he is particularly concerned with their weight) clearly indicate that he is planning to drown himself….

Not only is Quentin's world, like Benjy's, centered on Caddy, but he is equally incapable of adjusting to external realities. Attempting to preserve the moral code of the Old South, in which the honor of a family was equated with the chastity of its women, Quentin makes Caddy the repository of the Compson family honor. Although much is frequently made by critics of Quentin's incestuous desires toward his sister, according to the text he 'loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he knew well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead…[he] loved not the idea of the incest which he could not commit, but some presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment…. But [he] loved death above all, [he] loved only death.' Because he can neither accept a new code nor reject the moral code that invests value in a concept or a tradition rather than in human beings, Quentin chooses to kill himself so that Caddy's dishonor will die with his memory of it. Unable to reconcile reality with his rigid demands of what it should be, he removes himself irrevocably from the area of the conflict.

SECTION III: APRIL 6, 1928

In the first two sections Jason has been characterized, even as a child, as interested not in ideas, like Quentin, but in things—and particularly in their monetary value. In Benjy's section, the child Jason rejects Quentin's earlier gift of a bow and arrow on the grounds that it is now broken; since the object is now useless, the idea of the gift no longer exists. Similarly, Jason was often the treasurer in one or another childish enterprise, and is frequently described as keeping his fists in his pockets. As an adult, he is totally money-oriented, trusting no one and putting his faith only in money and the things it can buy. As Quentin

blamed his own condition upon Caddy's failure to live up to his demands on her, so Jason blames Caddy for cheating him, Jason, of his promised career. Jason had hoped to become a banker through the influence of Caddy's first husband—a hope that came to nothing when the man divorced her within a year after their wedding. Since Caddy's illegitimate daughter, Quentin, was probably the primary reason for the divorce, Jason has transferred his antipathy toward the absent Caddy to her present daughter, the embodied cause of his deprivation.

Quentin, growing up like Caddy in a loveless environment in which her relatives, for selfish reasons, demand a certain type of behavior from her, shows every sign of following in her mother's wayward footsteps. Jason tries to force her to maintain not the family honor that preoccupied his dead brother, but the appearance of respectability because he, Jason, has a position to uphold in the community.

PRESENT EVENTS IN SECTION III

Jason's section of the book, which takes place on Good Friday, is highly logical and therefore much easier to follow than the preceding two; the references to past events are quite clear in context. As the section opens, Jason drives Quentin to school and threatens her if she should cut her classes again. He then drives on into Jefferson to the farm-supply store where he works and finds waiting for him a letter from Caddy enclosing the monthly check for Quentin's support—from which Jason has been systematically stealing for seventeen years. There is also a letter from Caddy for Quentin with a fifty-dollar money order; Jason opens the letter and, when Quentin demands it, he tells her the money order is for ten dollars and makes her endorse it without seeing the fact of it.

Later in the afternoon he sees Quentin with a man wearing a red tie—a carnival pitchman. Furious at her for cutting school and for what he considers her loose behavior, he follows the pair until he is intercepted by a boy bearing a telegram saying that Jason's account on the cotton market, which had begun falling all morning, has been closed out. An hour later, Jason again pursues but does not catch them. Finally he goes home, having acquired two unwanted passes to the carnival. In the kitchen, Luster is moaning his lack of a quarter to see the show; Jason shows him the passes, but burns them rather than give them to the boy. During dinner Jason and Quentin quarrel, and Quentin leaves the table. Later in the evening Mrs. Compson locks Quentin's door, as is her custom, in order to prevent her from going out at night.

Jason's inner world is ruled by the letter—if not the spirit—of the law, by money, and by rules of conduct aimed at preserving an appearance of respectability…. 'I've got a position in this town, and I'm not going to have any member of my family going on like a nigger wench.' On Caddy's final visit to Jefferson in 1912 to attend—in disguise—her father's funeral, she had given Jason one hundred dollars to let her see her daughter 'just for a minute.' Jason kept his word to the letter: he drove past the spot where Caddy was waiting and held the baby Quentin up to the window of the buggy. When Caddy did not keep her part of the 'bargain' by taking a train out of town immediately after Jason became indignant…. Jason's relationships with other people are economic rather than emotional; he distrusts anything he cannot control. His arrangement with Lorraine, his peroxided mistress from Memphis, is lasting and satisfactory solely because no vestige of emotion ever enters into it. 'You's a cold man, Jason, if man you is,' Dilsey says, apropos of Jason's angry refusal to let Caddy see her daughter. 'I thank de Lawd I got mo heart dan dat, eben ef hit is black'….

SECTION IV: APRIL 8, 1928

The last section of the novel is narrated by the author in the third person and takes place entirely in the present. In it the personality of Dilsey, dimly seen in Benjy's section, is brought into sharp focus. She is, in many senses, the mainstay of the family, though they do not realize it. She has offered Quentin the only love the girl has ever known, and loves and cares for Benjy, whom no one cares about now that Caddy is gone. She puts up uncomplainingly with Mrs. Compson's whining, and she is not above criticism of Jason's sharp treatment of Quentin.

On Easter morning, Dilsey rises early, but finds that Luster has overslept and that the woodbox in the kitchen is empty and the stove cold. While Mrs. Compson complains from the head of the stairs, Dilsey

goes about her work, gets Mrs. Compson back to bed, sets the unwilling Luster to work, feeds Benjy, and prepares breakfast for the family. When Quentin does not appear for breakfast, Jason sends Dilsey up to get her, but Mrs. Compson has not yet unlocked Quentin's door and the girl does not answer. Jason snatches the ring of keys from his mother, but when he opens the door he finds the room empty and Quentin gone. Suspecting what has happened and almost frantic, he locks himself in his own room and takes his money box from its hiding place under the closet floor. The lock is broken and the money missing. Mrs. Compson, not knowing about the money, has immediately come to the conclusion that Quentin, like her uncle, has committed suicide. When Dilsey protests that Quentin has no reason to commit suicide, Mrs. Compson replies: 'What reason did Quentin [her son] have?'…

Jason calls the sheriff and leaves immediately; while he is out on his futile chase after the girl and the money, Dilsey, Luster, Frony, and Benjy go to the Easter service at the Negro church. After they return, Benjy cries and will not be hushed. Fearing that he will disturb Mrs. Compson, Dilsey lets Luster drive him out to the cemetery. As they reach the Confederate statue in the town square, Luster spies a group of his Negro friends and turns the horse to the left of the monument instead of the accustomed right; Benjy immediately begins to roar in agony and Jason, just back from his fruitless search, comes running. He strikes Luster out of the way and turns the horse around to the right side of the statue, forbidding Luster ever to take Benjy out again….

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.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* Act V, scene 5

The 'sound' and the 'fury,' of course, can refer specifically to Benjy's section, literally 'a tale told by an idiot.' Situations he does not like bring forth from the idiot either crying or an outraged, inarticulate bellow…. Benjy is incapable of communication, except for his wordless whimpering and bellowing—'just sound.' Like an animal, he can indicate a desire to go out or come in, or to be fed, and he can express distress, though not the cause of it; but he cannot communicate verbally with anyone. Yet, despite his total lack of mental ability, he is the most intuitive of the Compsons. It is frequently mentioned that he can 'smell death.' He knows, without knowing how he knows, that Caddy loves him, just as he knows that his mother, despite her conventional gestures of affection, dislikes him. Not understanding what those around him say, he reacts to the way he senses that they feel.

However, it is not only the 'tale told by an idiot' that signifies nothing; recalling the entire quotation, life itself may be the idiot's tale. More likely, it is the telling of the tale of life that is meaningless—the words, the verbalizations and falsifications of experience. It is interesting to note that, of the sections narrated by the Compsons, Benjy's is the most factually accurate, since he reports only what he sees and hears, without first filtering it through his imagination and without misrepresenting it because of his point of view. (He is as incapable of misinterpreting experience as he is of interpreting it in the first place.) This fact, of course, contributes to the difficulty many readers have in understanding his section. There are none of the familiar landmarks ordinarily found in a narrator's mind, no point of reference from which the action can be viewed; it is all there, in one continuous stream of Benjy's thought, in which past and present are undifferentiated, in which events are presented objectively and without apparent logic. Thus we know only that Benjy cries when he sees Quentin and the carnival man in the porch swing; he does not say why he cries, and we must infer (as we will learn later) that he remembers Caddy and another man in the same swing.

Quentin, a highly articulate young man, is scarcely more 'reasonable' that Benjy; but whereas Benjy, unable to speak, is thus freed from the tyranny of words, Quentin is trapped by words which, by themselves, have no meaning—chastity, honor, sin. He is deeply disturbed that both Caddy and her father refuse to take her seduction very seriously, for thus Caddy's dishonor and the resultant dishonor (in Quentin's mind) of the family become trivial. If Quentin could make of Caddy's 'fall' something

momentous, he could also make the family dishonor the result of a moral catastrophe—a sin—and therefore significant. At the same time, Quentin, a modern man, is unable to believe in the fact of sin, unable to find any act that is particularly terrible or worthy of the name of sin and damnation. He finds life—the 'loud world'—chaotic and unbearable, for it intrudes upon his inner world of ideal and abstraction, the static and changeless world of his mind which, unfortunately for him, can remain intact only so long as Caddy accedes to his unrealistic demands on her.

Trapped by words and paralyzed by his own egotism, Quentin tries to substitute words—which he has invested with a power and a meaning far above the act for which the word stands—for the acts he cannot bring himself to commit. He is thus unable to do anything, to stalk out and kill Caddy's seducer (as Julio tries to kill him for the supposed 'theft' of the little girl), as the outraged brother would have done according to the code of the Old South, for he knows that the act of vengeance can never counterbalance his purely abstract concept of dishonor. He needs to convince the world—by words, not by the act—that he has committed incest with Caddy, so that the world, in horror, would make outcasts of them, and they would be safely removed from reality and change. He tells his father that it was he, not Ames, who seduced Caddy….

Quentin searches blindly for a sin that will prove the reality of virtue, a dishonor that will validate the idea of honor. However, he is concerned not with the fact of virtue and honor, but with the idea of them; and his search is verbal rather than active, turned inward upon himself rather than outward toward others. He is as incapable of love as he is of incest, for both involve action, and love involves both communication and the acceptance of another person as a human being, not as a symbol. Thus, dissimilar as are Quentin and Jason in other ways, each in his own form of egocentricity regards other human beings as objects, and each attempts to use these 'objects' for their own ends.

CONCLUSION

All three of the narrators find the external world 'full of sound and fury,' and all three attempt to create some sort of order and coherence out of it; all have a need for absolutely stable centers of their respective universes. Benjy makes Caddy, who loves him, the center of his world; since for him time does not exist, her unchanging image remains even when she is no longer present. Quentin, who prefers abstraction to reality, makes his ideal Caddy the center of his world; when the ideal collapses in the conflict with reality, Quentin is left with chaos. Jason—logical, cold, and methodical—finds reality more adaptable to his needs than do his brothers, for the values of the external world are centered in just such things as Jason values: logic, law, the appearance of respectability, and money.

Only Dilsey, with her inner serenity, her faith, and her understanding, has an undistorted view of reality, and she alone, of all the characters, can perceive and respond to the needs of others. Quentin, an idealist, has taken a part of life and rejected the rest, in the same way that Jason rejects all that has no material value. Dilsey can accept the whole, and because of this she can see and respond to Ben's and Caddy's and her daughter Quentin's need for affection, and can recognize Jason's blindness and Mrs. Compson's whining selfishness. Because she is emotionally whole, she can minister to the weaknesses of the rest of the family, as they cannot. To Dilsey, the world is filled not with 'sound and fury,' but with compassion, sorrow, and love. The materialistic Jason may survive for awhile in a materialistic world, but it is the qualities that belong to Dilsey that will endure long after Jason is gone."

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 22-33

"*The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Faulkner said, began as a short story about Caddy Compson. Though the novel expands her story into the story of the Compson family, Caddy remains the focal center…. The nihilistic mood of the first three sections of the novel is created to a great extent by the reactions of the Compson brothers to the intrusion of reality upon their childhood world. Caddy's sexual maturity initiates that intrusion for Benjy and Quentin, and the results of her maturation affect Jason's ambitions and dreams. Caddy's own encounter with reality and the way she reacts to it is therefore the focal point of the novel. Only one Compson is capable of giving herself to love and to life—Caddy. Everyone else is completely

self-absorbed. Caddy is the only vibrant, warm, and loving person in the family. In adolescence, she responds to love and to life; later her natural response is twisted into something corrupt by her family. Driven by the sense of guilt they foster in her, she becomes promiscuous.

During her early adolescence, Caddy begins to attract boys and to react to them. At fourteen, she becomes interested in clothing, dresses herself up prettily and uses a bit of perfume. At fifteen she is at the kissing stage. Her behavior is normal and innocent, but Benjy, Quentin, and her mother react violently to these signs of maturity. Caddy is seventeen when she gives herself to Dalton Ames. She is passionately in love with him. As far as can be ascertained, he seems to return her love. He appears concerned for her in his meeting with Quentin, and shows himself in that encounter courageous, strong, and kind, treating Quentin with gentleness and understanding. We cannot be certain from the information provided, but it is possible that Dalton does not coldly and cruelly desert Caddy.

Suspecting that Quentin planned to meet Dalton, Caddy follows her brother. When she hears the pistol shot and rushes toward the bridge, she meets Dalton, who is leaving. Almost hysterical with fear for her brother's safety, she tells her lover that she never wants to see him again. Finding Quentin safe, she tries to pull free from her brother to run after Dalton to apologize; Quentin, however, holds her. We hear nothing more about Dalton's presence in the town after this scene; he may have left town immediately, and Caddy may never have had the chance to explain. Her anguish over her loss of Dalton is compounded by her mother's lamentations and her own sense of guilt about Benjy and Quentin.

She loves her brothers; she has, in fact, provided them the female love and tenderness that their mother could not give them. She understands Quentin's feelings far more clearly than he does himself. Her compassion for him is great enough to be self-sacrificial. She does not object to his proposal of a death-pact. She is too vitally alive, however, to help him plunge the knife into her throat. And later, though she is in love with Dalton, she is willing to commit incest if the act will bring Quentin release from his anguish. Caddy's love for her brother is not essentially incestuous; her offer of herself is an act of abnegation, motivated by a love that is almost maternal. Caddy's dilemma is that she must sacrifice her own response to life if she is to keep her brothers happy; but she is too passionate, too vibrantly alive, too vital to immolate herself.

Her loss of virginity produces a neurotic furor in the family. On orders from Mrs. Compson, Jason spies on his sister. Her mother's self-pitying lamentations turn Caddy's love for Dalton into something evil. Quentin's desperate death-plea borders on madness, and Benjy's howl tears at Caddy's heart. Mrs. Compson carries Caddy off to French Lick to find her a husband, an action that distorts Caddy's love by emphasizing its sinfulness. Between her affair with Dalton Ames and her marriage to Herbert Head nine months later, Caddy does become promiscuous. Her statements to Quentin on the eve of her marriage reveal how deeply the reactions of her family have affected her. She has apparently been punishing herself by taking lovers…. She is two months pregnant by an unknown lover when she marries Herbert, whom she does not love. Certainly one of the reasons that she marries is to save her family from disgrace. She is a tortured young woman when, about to marry, she begs Quentin to care for Benjy and her father. Her sense of guilt about them is an unusual display of concern for others in a household like the Compsons'.

Caddy's suffering increases with her marriage. Her husband, apparently deciding that the baby she bears is not his, forces her to leave his house. Caddy's love for her baby, a dramatic contrast to her mother's inability to love, places her at the mercy of her brother Jason. She sacrifices herself to support the child, sending two hundred dollars every month for fifteen years and extra money whenever she can in the desperate and futile hope that she can buy her daughter a semblance of the family life that she herself is unable to provide. Caddy is by no means a paragon of virtue, but whatever her weaknesses and her sins, she achieves stature because she opens her heart to those around her. In a dying family she is the only one who is alive, who is not afraid to live and to love. Ironically, it is this very quality that creates such disastrous effects for Benjy and Quentin….

The first three sections present, through the minds of her brothers, Caddy's tragic history and its effects upon their own lives. By means of the interior monologue technique in these sections, the past and the present are juxtaposed, the effects related to the cause. This method, used in three of the four sections, is

confusing to the uninitiated reader… When a reader attempts to set the scenes in each section into chronological order, he discovers that he has constructed a different novel; the same is true if the ordering of the sections is altered….

In his first three sections, Faulkner presents three different images of modern man—a sterile idiot, a virgin suicide, a deliberately childless and cruel egoist. (The images are not three representations of an identical mood: in order of presentation they create an intensification of the nihilistic mood.) The three sections also create a thematic progression by presenting the human being in a different stage of his development: Benjy's is a child mind, Quentin's an adolescent mind, Jason's the mind of an adult. This progression, ironically, represents a deterioration, which is, essentially, a loss of emotional response. Benjy is all feeling and no power of reason; Jason is rationalism triumphant over feeling….

The Compsons still retain the appurtenances of a plantation society family, with a whole family of Negroes to care for its needs. In 1928, the holdings have almost vanished. The pasture is gone, the barn, with a jagged hole in its roof, contains one old horse and a dilapidated carriage; the house is unpainted. Only Dilsey and Luster are left to work for the Compsons. In Section I, the past that reveals the sterility of the present is the immediate past of childhood. The Compson family is deteriorating socially and morally, but these aspects of decay have little significance for Benjy. He suffers from the loss of Caddy, the emotional center of his childhood world. Essentially, Benjy's loss and Quentin's are the same….

Benjy's thought-flow evokes the feeling of a child's world—its security, order, and love—and, at the same time, the feelings accompanying the loss of that world. The majority of Benjy's recollections record the existence and then the loss of some important element of his childhood. Every change, destroying his sense of security and order, evokes a howl of protest….

[Benjy] reacts to sensory stimuli; otherwise, the activity of his brain is limited to memory. He is incapable of making judgments, of understanding relationships between ideas or events. At thirty-three, he has not learned that fire burns…. Benjy also is devoid of a time sense, making no differentiation between the past and the present. A remembered event is as real to him as an occurrence in the present…. Sitting with his feet in the water of the creek as Luster searches for a lost quarter duplicates the sensation Benjy experienced in 1898, and he begins to relive the events of the day that his grandmother, Damuddy, died…. Benjy relives fifteen events from the past…. Faulkner skillfully gives the reader external physical clues to indicate a transition in thought…. Though the type shift offers a clue to a transition in Benjy's thoughts, it is not always a reliable guide. Another clue to a shift in scene and to the chronology of events in the story is provided by Benjy's Negro companions…. When Benjy is a child, he is cared for by Versh; when the idiot is about eleven, T. P. takes over the role of caretaker….

Death makes its first impression upon him when the mare, Nancy, breaks its leg falling into the ditch and must be shot by Roskus. Then Damuddy dies. Though Benjy's memory focuses upon Caddy rather than upon the death of the grandmother, the incident has made its impression upon him, as do each of the four deaths that take place. The change of his name from Maury to Benjamin remains in his memory primarily because Caddy becomes increasingly protective…. Benjy sits before the mirror, watching a reflection of the ordered world that he knows: Caddy fighting with Jason because Jason has cut up Benjy" paper dolls; Mr. Compson settling the quarrel and meting out justice; Caddy protecting Benjy from her mother's stupidity. In these two earliest scenes are portrayed the pattern of Benjy's child world. At the same time, both scenes record a loss. From this point on, each remembered scene, in its chronological order, depicts either a loss or an alteration that will lead to a loss. Most of these scenes are related to the central loss of Benjy's existence: the loss of his sister Caddy….

When Caddy is fifteen, she becomes interested in boys and sits with Charlie in the swing. Benjy, sensing the threat, searches for Caddy, and when he finds her in the cedar grove, he howls. Again Caddy restores order for Benjy by washing her mouth. These incidents are preludes to the annihilation of Benjy's world. Each time, water restores innocence; but when Caddy loses her virginity, washing does no good. Caddy can never again smell like trees. Caddy's marriage completes the process… To pay for the wedding and for Quentin's year at Harvard, Mr. Compson sells the pasture that Benjy loves. After Caddy's wedding, Benjy continues his routine of waiting for his sister at the gate. He does not know precisely what

he waits for, but he knows that something is missing. His sexual impulses get mixed up in this sense of loss; and after he chases the school girls, he loses his sexuality: he is castrated….

The Compson pasture has become a golf course. Benjy enjoys watching the players… Benjy is also fond of playing with what Dilsey calls his graveyard—a bottle in which he sticks two stalks of jimson weed. This game unites symbols of all his losses. The mound is the cemetery with its adornment of flowers. Jimson weed, a weed with a nasty smell commonly known as stink weed, is an ironic symbol of the loss of Caddy who smelled like trees. The weed was used by Southern Negroes as a contraceptive medicine, and among hill people it was considered a symbol of the male sex organ. The two weeds in the bottle become a memorial to Benjy's sexuality…. Holding the white satin slipper (probably one of Caddy's wedding slippers), provides him comfort…. What Benjy really loses in his loss of Caddy is love. As the rest of the novel reveals, loss of love is the central theme of decay in modern society. All the other aspects of deterioration, social and moral, apparent in the juxtaposition of Benjy's childhood world and his adult life, are symptomatic….

The limitations imposed by Benjy's mind upon the narrative technique actually make Section I—once certain devices are recognized—easier to understand than Quentin's section, which is filled with allusions, images, symbols, and thought associations. Every line in Benjy' section (except one or two 'Caddy smelled like trees') can be identified either as part of one of the fifteen scenes recalled by him, or as part of the action in the present. Some of the remembered scenes are long—Damuddy's death scene has eighteen fragments scattered throughout the section; the scene where Benjy's name is changed has twenty separate fragments—but most of the scenes are short… It is precisely the quality and intensity of reader participation that Faulkner requires which makes *The Sound and the Fury* a reading experience of the highest order….

Quentin's is an adolescent mind in stasis. The normal adolescent adjusts to the discoveries his increased awareness and his experience force upon him, gradually bringing his idealized childhood vision into adjustment with reality. Quentin, however, is emotionally unstable, and attempts to keep intact his youthful world, to stave off the intrusion of reality. He tries to isolate himself from the 'loud, harsh world,' is unable to do so, and destroys himself….

In the scene with Natalie, Quentin responds sexually to the adolescent girl. Caddy enters the barn and observes them. When Natalie leaves, Quentin throws himself into the pig trough, an expression of revulsion against his sexual feelings. This reaction may be due, in part, to his moralistic and religious training, but, as far as his other responses to sex indicate, it has its source more in his fear that the sexual feeling threatens his relationship with his sister…. He smears the mud from his own body on her. In this incident, his own sexuality—not Caddy's—becomes for Quentin a threat to the status quo of his child world….

The symbol of honeysuckle is introduced in the scene immediately following Quentin's discovery of Caddy's loss of innocence. Honeysuckle is not simply a symbol of Quentin's incestuous desire; it is a symbol of sex, of his and Caddy's sexual maturity. It is a pervasive odor from which Quentin cannot escape, just as he cannot escape the loss of his childhood relationship with Caddy. Sex threatens the world that Quentin must preserve…. The scene at the creek shows that Quentin's sole desire is to keep his insulated world intact by denying the reality of Caddy' act. His suggestion that they have committed incest is only one of several insane proposals. He first insists that she admit that Dalton Ames forced her and that she does not love the man. Then he suggest that she gave herself to him, not to Dalton. Finally, he proposes a suicide pact…. Quentin wants only to *say* that he committed incest. His sole desire is to isolate himself and Caddy somehow from the rest of the world as they were isolated during their childhood…. Death, Caddy's independence, and the water merge together for Quentin. (It may be that in this fusion is explained his choice of death by water.)….

Mr. Compson undoubtedly contributes much to Quentin's youthful vision. Quentin sees himself as the inheritor of a tradition of nobility, in which gentility, chivalry, courage, honesty, and integrity are accepted and practiced virtues—the tradition of plantation aristocracy, refined and romanticized…. Quentin's meeting with Dalton is a disaster. His conception of himself in the traditional role of protector of women

collapses, not only because he fails to accomplish his purpose but because he is forced to recognize his own weakness. Dalton is actually a reflection of Quentin's vision of himself: calm, courageous, strong, kind. The real Quentin does not measure up to the ideal Quentin, just as reality does not measure up to Quentin's romantic vision of what life should be…. Generation by generation the character of the Compson men has been attenuated. Mr. Compson and his son are not men of action as were their ancestors. Their withdrawal from life is a manifestation of their weakness….

Mr. Compson has passed on to his son a belief in an aristocratic code of conduct, and he must, therefore, at one time have believed sufficiently in these concepts to consider them worthy of inculcating in his children. His extreme cynicism and his alcoholism are obvious results of his own total disenchantment with life, with himself, and with the society he lives in. His cynicism is that of a disillusioned idealist…. Since he passed on his nihilistic views to his adolescent son, it is no wonder that Quentin struggles so desperately to remain within his childhood world. The alternative is the nothingness of his father's views…. Virginity is meaningless, and what is true about virginity is true about all human values. They are all created by man; they are not absolutes. Nothing in life has stability; everything is subject to the destructive force of time….

By giving Deacon [the black factotum of Southern students at Harvard] clothing, Quentin assumes the role of white patron, a role difficult to play with Deacon, a clever opportunist who makes profitable use of the Southern students' desire for the white-Negro relationship to which they are accustomed. Dressed in an Uncle Tom's Cabin outfit, Deacon meets the trains bringing Southerners to the campus…. Another aspect of Quentin's plantation-society ideal is revealed through the characters of Mrs. Bland and her son Gerald, Southerners from Kentucky…. The Blands' ideal is English nobility…. Under his mother's tutelage, Gerald does everything a true gentleman should do. Mrs. Bland's concept of a gentleman demands birth below the Mason-Dixon line. Poor Shreve, unlucky enough to be a Canadian, is not fit companion for a Southerner, and Mrs. Bland tries to get Quentin a new roommate. The Blands are an absurd and amusing pair…. To Quentin, the Blands represent a deterioration of Southern society, but despite his contempt for them, Quentin is drawn into their company, because they represent, however burlesqued, the traditional world he considers his heritage…. The real irony in the presence of the Blands in the novel is that they are probably a closer representation of plantation aristocracy than Quentin's idealized vision of it. Gerald is crude, egotistical, arrogant, and immoral; and his mother is silly, superficial, and bigoted. Their life and values probably depict the reality of the dead society to which Quentin attributes the great and noble virtues…. Of all the Southerners with Quentin at Harvard, Spoade is the only one who seems mature….

[Quentin] thinks in abstractions and symbols. But because Quentin's is an obsessed mind all his thoughts, images, allusions, memories, and reactions to immediate stimuli are related to his obsession. When he awakens on the morning of June 2, 1910, Quentin's psychological illness has just about run its course. He knows that this is to be the final day of his life. He has made his decision to commit suicide, and not once throughout the entire day does be betray any sign of indecision. The image of his body in the water recurs constantly as an image of longed-for peace….

The thought of Jesus suggests St. Francis, who called death 'little sister.' Death and sister are associated with hell and punishment for incest, the incest Quentin did not commit but which he nevertheless confessed to his father. The memory of this confession forces to the surface the thought he is fighting to keep below the level of consciousness—his sister's affair with Dalton Ames…. Not only do all Quentin's memories and allusions reflect his anguish, but everything that occurs to him in the present becomes associated with Caddy's seducer, Dalton Ames. Whenever he thinks of Harvard, Quentin is led to the memory of Caddy's wedding because Herbert Head, whom she marries, attended Harvard….

Right after her affair in the summer of 1909, he talks with his father about suicide; but he is still alive eight months later to attend Caddy's wedding. The wedding announcement, which he leaves unopened for three days and visualizes as a bier with its two candles and flower, is his death warrant. On the even of the wedding he desperately begs Caddy not to marry Herbert but to run away with him and Benjy instead. He is concerned in that scene with losing her irrevocably, not with her honor. It is the loss of Caddy herself, far more than her loss of honor, that really disturbs Quentin. It is only when Caddy forces her brother, by her marriage, to recognize that their relationship can never again be what it was that Quentin must commit

suicide. Quentin's emotional dependence on his sister is so great that he centers all his idealism upon her. Religious and moral values are equated with her sexual innocence, and with her conduct. Thus only in his childhood relationship with Caddy can Quentin keep his world intact….

There is a quality of defiance in Quentin's suicide. He has not reached the stage of believing that Caddy is not quite worth despair, but he is not at all convinced that he will not reach that stage as time passes. Quentin, in effect, kills himself to stop time because time is the ultimate reality. Time has measured his own and Caddy's development into maturity…. Quentin equates time with reality, and that is why on the final day of his life he devotes so much effort to escape from the symbols of time. His own shadow is a reflection of passing time and he tries to avoid seeing it. He breaks his watch, symbolically stopping time. But as long as he remains alive he cannot escape from time….

Water is Quentin's logical refuge. In his early years, it was the restorative whenever reality threatened. Caddy washed off her perfume; Quentin and Caddy washed the mud from the pig trough after the Natalie incident; Caddy sat in the creek when her family discovered her affair with Dalton. For Quentin water does not absolve nor regenerate; it restores by effacing reality. It stops time. The events of Quentin's final day dramatize the futility of his attempt to escape time…. On the bridge, which he has chosen for his suicide, he stares into the water. He sees a big trout that has defied the local fishermen. The trout becomes a symbol of stability in water….

Shreve…asks him if he has dressed in his best clothes to attend a wedding or a funeral. Quentin, of course, is concerned with both: his sister's wedding causes his own funeral…. There are several dimensions of irony in Quentin's involvement with the child whom he calls little sister. The episode becomes an inverted image of the experiences he is trying to keep below the level of consciousness. He has struggled to keep his own sister; now he cannot get rid of 'sister.' He has envisioned himself as the protector of women; now he is accused of assaulting a child. Sex has destroyed his own child world, and Julio's accusation justifiably makes Quentin laugh hysterically. The corrupt marshal and the justice of the peace reveal the gap between Quentin's ideals and reality…. Quentin's attempt to isolate himself from the real world on this final day of his life is as futile as was his attempt to keep his child world intact….

He must go into the water dressed as a gentleman. On the interurban trolley back to town, he remains socially aware and is shy about the black eye Gerald gave him…. In the evening, as his death hour approaches, the tempo of his thought association becomes very rapid. Water and death images are frequent. Many of the allusions that dominated his thoughts in the morning recur…. Quentin's ironic vision of himself as an upholder of lost values is reflected in his identification with Jesus…. Quentin's suicide cannot be interpreted in metaphysical terms: He does not kill himself because he agrees with his father that life is meaningless or because he wants to shut off consciousness before he comes to the point when he no longer suffers from the loss of Caddy. His problem is emotional, involving his deepest psychic bond—to his sister, whom he has lost. Despite his weakness and self-involvement, Quentin is a sympathetic character. Section II is a heartfelt cry of despair, one of the most moving expressions of disillusionment and suffering in literature. It dramatizes that state of mind and soul that Existentialists have described and that Sartre has term *l'angoise,* when man knows absolute despair and either commits suicide or develops a vision that gives meaning to existence….

Caroline Bascomb Compson is obviously neurotic. She has four children, but she can be a mother to only one of them—Jason. Dilsey has assumed the burden of caring for the children; Mrs. Compson retreats to her bedroom with psychosomatic headaches. She is completely self-absorbed, and she responds to all situations with self-pity…. She describes the suicide of her son as inconsiderate. It is suggested that her sense of social inferiority helps to make her what she is…. She alienates herself from Quentin and Caddy because they are more Compson than Bascomb, and her division of the family is apparent in Quentin's thoughts. He invariably associates his mother, Uncle Maury, and Jason with anti-Compson characteristics. Whatever the source of her neuroticism, Mrs. Compson is in constant retreat from reality, retaining a vision of herself as a refined, naïve, fragile Southern lady. For a long time she refuses to accept the idea that she produced an idiot child….

The traditional moral and social values that Mr. Compson inculcates in his son are not the values of Mrs. Compson. Like her son Jason, she is more concerned with appearances than with moral integrity…. To Mrs. Compson, Caddy's transgression can be remedied by finding her a husband. The kind of woman Mrs. Compson is and the values she accepts are best revealed in the kind of man Jason becomes. Throughout her life, Mrs. Compson takes comfort in Jason" he is the only child who turns out as she wanted…. There can be no question that Quentin's emotional instability is related to the failure of Mrs. Compson to provide her children with the love they required. Unquestionably, too, Quentin's disgust with his own initial sexual impulses is related to the emotional deprivation of his early years….

In Section III Faulkner dramatizes the self-interest, the failure of love and compassion characteristic of modern man. At one end of the spectrum is Jesus, who preached love and died for his fellowman; at the other is his modern counterpart Jason, who hates his fellowman. Section III is a bitter invective against modern society, its commercialism, its inhumanity, its superficial social and moral codes, its devotion to mechanical contrivances. The section represents modern man living a life of sound and fury signifying nothing…. The only scene that Sections I and III have in common is the funeral of Mr. Compson…. Of the three sections, the third, Jason's, is simplest. Jason is by no means a balanced individual, but his thought-pattern is logical. Also, because he is ignorant, superficial, and egotistical, his thoughts are easy to follow. He is prejudiced and his mind is filled with tags and cliches: once a bitch always a bitch; just like a woman; Negroes are all worthless and lazy; Jews are fine as individuals but…. In contrast to Quentin, Jason has tried to cut himself off from the past….

Jason Compson is a repulsive and cruel man; he is the reality that Quentin could not accept. And the life of the angry Jason, filled with sound and fury, is empty and utterly meaningless. Jason is the only one of the Compson brothers who achieves functioning adulthood. He is, Faulkner informs us in the Appendix to the novel, sane, but this statement is ironic…. One of the most despicable characters Faulkner ever created, Jason may very well rank with the most hateful villains in literature. He is man depicted at his lowest possible state. He values nothing, and cares only for surface appearances. He is not concerned with the morality of his niece's actions: his only objection is that the townspeople will talk and that her promiscuity will reflect upon him…. Conscience is meaningless to him…. God does not exist; human relationships and feelings have no significance unless they are translated into monetary terms. The one person with whom he is apparently at ease is Lorraine, a whore…. Jason can survive as an adult while his brothers cannot because the vision of life that he brings out of his childhood approximates the reality of the world. With his complete lack of human feeling, Jason fits readily into modern society….

When Caddy's marriage fails, Jason loses his financial opportunity. As did his brothers, Jason howls in protest at his loss. His protest takes the form of revenge. In 1928, it is eighteen years since he was promised the job. Jason's sense of loss has not diminished. He continually measures his present condition against what he might have been if his sister's marriage had not collapsed, and his father had given him the education Quentin wasted. Bitterness and hate dominate Jason's personality. Despite his belief that his bitterness has its source in Caddy's failure, it becomes apparent that Jason is actually keeping alive his bitterness to justify his own failure…. Jason's concept of himself as a practical businessman is…contradicted by his act of withdrawing a thousand dollars from Earl's business to buy a car. By doing so, he reduces his position from partner to clerk and buys a machine that causes him intense agony. His purchase of the car, and use of it, despite the severe headaches the smell of gasoline causes him, are as irrational as most of his other actions….

Jason is driven by an intense inner fury that is completely uncontrollable. Chasing his niece Quentin and the pitchman around the countryside is, typically, an irrational act. The pair has seen him; they know that he is following them. Under the circumstances, he has little chance of catching them in the love act, which seems to be his aim. Not one of the thoughts he records during the chase—though they all seem rational—provides an explanation of his action. When he sees his niece with the pitchman, he flies into a rage. The market is fluctuating wildly and he should be following it closely, but he dashes off on a senseless, futile chase.…

One of the causes for the complete lack of meaning in Jason's life is his alienation from the past. He is like the representatives of modern society in Eliot's 'The Waste Land,' for whom the past holds no

significance. Jason is the end product of a society that has abandoned traditional humanistic values. Only such values can give meaning to life, and by cutting himself off from them, modern man becomes a Jason voyaging furiously for nothing….

Mrs. Compson seizes upon Jason as the tangible evidence of her own separation from her husband and the Compsons. She makes Jason her ally against the enemy, and spoils him, setting him apart from his father and brothers and sister. Out of her own sense of inferiority, her own psychological limitation, she molds Jason to become the exact opposite of everything that the Compsons represent to her. She makes it impossible for Jason to establish an affectionate relationship with the other children, and the love that he might have given them is turned inward. Jason's extreme selfishness as an adult is a direct result of Mrs. Compson's tutelage…. Jason becomes an exaggerated reflection of his mother, carrying to extremes her self-absorption, her superficial social and moral values, her alienation from people. Although the recollections of Benjy and Quentin reveal Mrs. Compson as devoid of maternal feelings, in comparison to Jason she appears almost warm in her concern….

The climax of the action in this final section, which takes place on Easter day, is the Easter sermon. All the characteristics that Dilsey displayed in earlier scenes in the book are reinforced by her activities and attitudes on Easter morning. She reveals a solidity of character that defies the destructive force of time. Dilsey has served the Compsons through several generations…. She has served as a buffer between Benjy and his family, between Mrs. Compson and the facts of life, between Jason and Caddy's daughter Quentin. She is a servant, but she works with such devotion and responsibility that she has far more dignity than those she serves.

The source of Dilsey's strength is her humanity. She is incapable of thinking in abstractions, in terms of servant or employer, Negro or white; hers is a genuine response to individuals and to life. Aside from Caddy, she is the only person who insists upon Benjy's humanity, treating and respecting him as a child. On his thirty-third birthday, she makes him a cake, using her own funds for the ingredients, to forestall Jason's objections. Mrs. Compson seems unaware that it is her son's birthday…. Simple and uneducated, she presents a startling contrast to the sterile and doomed philosophizing of Mr. Compson and Quentin, and to the meaningless logic of Jason. In the heart, not the mind, is the salvation of mankind….

The full significance of Dilsey's role is revealed by the Easter service. Benjy is the only Compson to attend services. Jason is chasing after his money; Mrs. Compson lies in bed with an unread Bible beside her. At the beginning of the sermon, the preacher speaks in measured white-man tones. The congregation is attentive but unmoved. Gradually, however, as the tone shifts into Negro dialect and the sermon becomes a repetitive chant, the people begin to respond with intensity. The preacher utters no dogmas or intellectual concepts. His chant becomes a primitive expression of faith beyond intellect or rationality, and the response of Dilsey and the other Negroes is emotional and mystical. For the Compsons, father and son, the moral light rays emanating from Jesus have dimmed thought time. But for Dilsey the rays burn brightly. The past and the present are united for her; the human values symbolized by Jesus are alive in Dilsey. The only Compson who is at the service sits quietly. Benjy cannot respond, but on his own primitive level he feels, unknowingly, the love that Dilsey embodies. The Easter sermon, as a simple declaration of faith, is not unlike St. Francis's 'Canticle of the Sun,' with its expression of belief in salvation through unquestioning faith, humility, and love…. In the sterile wasteland of the modern world, Dilsey is the symbol of resurrection and life….

Like a poet, Faulkner is communicating primarily on an emotional level. His techniques, interior monologues, symbols, images, allusions, his structural devices, all contribute to the creation and communication of feeling…. Faulkner's dating three of the four sections to correspond with the Easter season is obviously designed to evoke associations for the reader with the story of Jesus and the story of the Resurrection, and thereby provide an ironic contrast to the loveless, dying world of the Compsons. In the final section, Dilsey's response to the Easter sermon is used by Faulkner to communicate the feeling, without ever stating the idea, that human compassion is what modern man has lost and what he must recover to achieve regeneration. It should be remembered that a detailed analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* can explain the significance of scenes and symbols, but the scenes and symbols in this novel are not so much intellectually meaningful as they are emotionally evocative…"

Edmond L. Volpe
A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1964) 87-126

"*The Sound and the Fury*…deals with the degenerate members of an old southern family, a father who ruins himself by drink, a mother who is incapable of rearing her children, a daughter wanted in incestuous love by her brother and having an illegitimate child that grows up to elope with a showman. One of the sons, a Harvard student, kills himself, the other one is a bully and the third one an idiot. The whole tale, partly indeed 'told by an idiot,' signifies nothingness in so far as the evaluation of the soul of Man is almost nihilistic. Of all the characters, the idiot alone and possibly his feeble-minded uncle, together with the Negro servants, call for something approaching sympathy, which indirectly amounts to a declaration of bankruptcy as regards the qualities of the whites in full possession of their senses.

As a straightforward narrative of such events might well be unbearable, Faulkner makes extensive use of the Joycean method, though in this he is probably less convincing than his Irish master. Thus the first part of the novel is given in the first person singular of the idiot son—but the stream of consciousness fluctuating between the past and the present does not always have the natural flow that would make it entirely plausible. This is also the case in the second part, in which the events are recorded by the brother in a roughly similar technique. And yet, the novel will keep its position in the development of American fiction, because it is one of the first attempts of the present age at a synthesis between the treatment of evil as a symbol and an oblique way of presenting it."

Heinrich Straumann
University of Zurich
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 87-88

"In his most agonizing recollections of Caddy, [Quentin] sees her at twilight, sitting in the cleansing waters of the branch and surrounded by the scent of honeysuckle, and these three elements of the scene—the twilight, the water, and the honeysuckle—take on an obsessive significance for Quentin himself and operate as recurrent symbols throughout this section of the novel. As water is associated with cleansing, redemption, peace, and death, and the honeysuckle with warm Southern nights and Caddy's passionate sexuality, so twilight, 'that quality of light as if time really had stopped for a while,' becomes inextricably confused in Quentin's mind with the scents of water and of honeysuckle until 'the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest'…

Each man, apprehending some fragment of the truth, seizes upon that fragment as though it were the whole truth and elaborates it into a total vision of the world, rigidly exclusive and hence utterly fallacious. This forms an essential part of the conception which Faulkner dramatized through the interior monologues of the first three sections of *The Sound and the Fury*, and the novel might thus be considered as in some sense a development, much richer than anything of which Anderson himself was capable, of the 'theory of the grotesque' propounded at the beginning of *Winesburg, Ohio*… Faulkner admired *Winesburg, Ohio,* and there is a discernible similarity between Anderson's conception of Winesburg and Faulkner's conception of Jefferson, the town which he had begun somewhat painstakingly to lay out in *Sartoris* and which in *The Sound and the Fury* is for the first time integrated into the structure and action of the novel….

The pattern established by Faulkner's disposition of the novel's four sections can be viewed in a number of different ways, and they have been seen, for example, as exemplifying different levels of consciousness, different modes of apprehension or cognition, contrasted states of innocence and experience; M. Coindreau speaks of them as four movements of a symphony. All these elements are present, and there is an over-all movement outward from Benjy's intensely private world to the fully public and social world of the fourth section. The pattern, however, is not solely progressive: despite the superficial affinities between the first and second sections on the one hand and the third and fourth sections on the other, the most fundamental relationships would seem to be those between the first and last sections, which offer a high degree of objectivity, and between the second and third, which are both intensely subjective.

Benjy is a first-person narrator, as are Quentin and Jason, but his observations do not pass through an intelligence which is capable of ordering, and hence distorting, them; he reports the events of which he is a spectator, and even those in which he is himself a participator, with a camera-like fidelity. His view of Caddy, it is true is highly personal, but we infer this view from the scenes which his camera-mind records; Benjy does not himself interpret this or other situations and events; still less does he attempt to impose a distorted interpretation upon the reader, as, in effect, do Quentin and Jason. Nor does he himself judge people, although he becomes the instrument by which the other characters are judged, their behavior toward him serving as a touchstone of their humanity. Faulkner seems to have worked gradually toward the convention of pure objectivity which he follows in the Benjy section…

Quentin is, of course, very much like his father in many ways, and in his obsession with family tradition and honor it is understandable that he should refer to his father, the head of the family, as a transmitter of that tradition and as a source of authority and advice. The irony of this situation, however, and a major cause of Quentin's tragedy, is that just as his mother has failed him as a source of love so his father fails him utterly in all his roles of progenitor, confessor, and counselor. He has become, indeed, Quentin's principal enemy, his cold and even cynical logic persistently undermining the very basis of all those idealistic concepts to which Quentin so passionately holds.

Throughout the section there is a battle in progress between Quentin's romantic idealism and Mr. Compson's somewhat cynical realism, a battle which is not finally resolved in *The Sound and the Fury* and which is resumed on an even larger scale in *Absalom, Absalom!* Indeed, if we are to understand that the discussion between Quentin and his father at the end of the section is purely a figment of Quentin's imagination and never actually took place, then it has to be said that in *The Sound and the Fury* the battle is never properly joined…and that it is, rather, a series of skirmishes in which Quentin suffers a progressive erosion of his position and a steady depletion of his reserves. Father and son are, in any case, too much alike in their fondness for words, for abstractions, and in choosing to evade life—the one in drink, the other in suicide—rather than actively confront it…

Throughout the whole day of quite extraordinary incident—with two fights, an arrest, a court hearing, much movement, and many encounters—Quentin's mind remains preoccupied with the past. It is almost as though Faulkner were playing on the idea that a drowning man sees his whole life pass before him, and we come to realize that this last day of Quentin's is a kind of suspended moment before death…. His search is for a means of arresting time at a moment of achieved perfection, a moment when he and Caddy could be eternally together in the simplicity of their childhood relationship; his idea of announcing that he and Caddy had committed incest was, paradoxically, a scheme for regaining lost innocence….

But Quentin's conception is artificial, rigid, life-denying: as Mr. Compson observes, 'Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy…' The inadequacy of Quentin's position is exposed in terms of Caddy and her vitality and humanity. In the Benjy section we recognize Caddy as the principal sustainer of such family unity as survives: we glimpse her as the liveliest spirit among the children and their natural leader, as the protector and comforter of Benjy, and even as the pacifier of her mother, and it is highly significant for us as well as for Benjy that she is persistently associated with such elemental things as the fire, the pasture, the smell of trees, and sleep… Caddy finds an outlet from family repression in sexual activity, but she is also both a principle and a symbol of social disruption….

It is characteristic that Jason should be the only member of the Compson family who is able to cope with the practical and social implications of Caddy's defection. Where Mrs. Compson can only moistly complain, Benjy bellow his incomprehending grief, Quentin commit suicide, Jason can adjust himself to the situation and turn it to his own advantage and profit. Jason—the one Compson who was capable of meeting Snopes on his own ground, as Faulkner wrote to Malcolm Cowley—becomes in this way the representative of the new commercial South…. Jason's singleminded and ruthless pursuit of material self-interest serves to isolate him not only from his family but from the community as a whole…. His contempt for the town is only exceeded by his contempt for his own family, its history, and its pretensions….

Since Jason's instincts are commercial and materialistic, they are also antirural and antitraditional: he is a willed deracination from the community in which he continues to live…. The progression from Benjy's section through Quentin's to Jason's is accompanied by an increasing sense of social reality. Benjy is remote in his idiocy and innocence, Quentin moves from the isolation of his half-mad idealism into the total withdrawal of suicide, but Jason is wholly in the world, acutely sensitive to social values, swimming with the contemporary commercial current. The action of the novel is thus presented increasingly in terms of social, economic, and political perspectives; it is Jason who first refers, however ironically, to the family's more distinguished past, and it is not until the last section of the novel that we are first given an image of the Compson house in all its decrepitude….

Simply by giving us for the first time detailed physical descriptions of Dilsey, Benjy, Jason, and Mrs. Compson, Faulkner—playing on some of the most fundamental of human responses to storytelling—effectively modifies our feelings toward them. Simply by recreating in such detail the routine of Dilsey's day, evoking the qualities demanded in performing duties in a household such as that of the Compsons', Faulkner allows her to emerge for the first time both as a fully drawn character and as a powerful positive presence. When the action shifts to Jason and his vain pursuit of Quentin we notice that many of his experiences have something in common with Quentin's experiences during the last day of his life—there are, for example, the journeyings back and forth, the moments of violence, the unsatisfactory brushes with the representatives of the law—and we come finally to recognize that, for all the differences between them, both brothers display a similar obsessiveness and fundamental irrationality….

The Easter Sunday service in the Negro church is immensely moving, an apotheosis of simplicity, innocence, and love, with Dilsey and Benjy as the central figures…. But the moment passes; the sense of human communion rapidly dissolves as they move into the world of 'white folks' and return to the Compson house, described now for the first time and seen as a symbol of decay…. It is clear, however, that Faulkner does not intend any simple moral division between the Negroes and their white employers. Luster in particular has been less impressed by the service than by the performance on the musical saw he had witnessed the previous night, and in his treatment of Benjy he displays a streak of mischievous cruelty. Dilsey tries to comfort Ben, but she is forced to rely upon the treacherous Luster to take him to the cemetery and it is with a note of pathetic resignation that she says, 'I does de bes I kin.'

On the final pages of the novel it is pride, the sin which has been the downfall of the Compson family, which induces Luster to drive to the left at the monument instead of to the right, and if the final restoration of Benjy's sense of order seems at first to offer a positive conclusion to the novel we must also remember that the order thus invoked is one purely of habit, entirely lacking in inherent justification, and that it is restored by Jason, whose concern is not with humanity or morality or justice but only with social appearances. As so often in this novel, such meaning as at first sight the incidents appear to possess proves on closer inspection to dissolve into uncertainty and paradox."

Michael Millgate
"The Sound and the Fury"
The Achievement of William Faulkner
(Random House 1966) 94-111

"To the end of his life, Faulkner spoke of Caddy with deep devotion. She was, he suggested, both the sister of his imagination and 'the daughter of his mind.' Born of his own discontent, she was for him 'the beautiful one,' his 'heart's darling.' It was Caddy, or more precisely, Faulkner's feeling for the emerging Caddy, that turned a story called 'Twilight' into a novel called *The Sound and the Fury*: 'I loved her so much,' he said, that 'I couldn't decide to give her life just for the duration of a short story. She deserved more than that. So my novel was created, almost in spite of myself'…. Like Benjy, Quentin and Jason also turn toward Caddy, seeking to find in her some way of meeting needs ignored or thwarted by their parents…. Given the novel's technical brilliance, it is easy to forget how simple and how moving its basic story is. In it we observe four children come of age amid the decay and dissolution of their family…. Mr. Compson is a weak, nihilistic alcoholic who toys with the emotions and needs of his children. Even when he feels sympathy and compassion, he fails to show it effectively. Mrs. Compson is a cold, self-involved woman who expends her energies worrying about her ailments, complaining about her life, and clinging to her notions of respectability….

In one of the New Orleans sketches, Faulkner introduces a girl who presents herself to her lover as 'Little sister Death.' In an allegory written in 1926 for Helen Baird, who was busy rejecting his love, he reintroduces the figure called Little sister Death, this time in the company of a courtly knight and lover—which is, of course, one of the roles Quentin seeks to play…. Quentin kills himself in part as punishment for his forbidden desires; in part because Caddy proves corruptible; in part, perhaps, because he decides 'that even she was not quite worth despair.' But he also kills himself because he fears his own inconstancy. What he discovers in himself is deep psychological impotence. He is unable to play either of the heroic roles—as seducer or as avenger—that he deems appropriate to his fiction of himself as a gallant, chivalric lover. What he fears is that he will ultimately fail, too, in the role of the despairing lover. What he cannot abide is the prospect of a moment when Caddy's corruption no longer matters to him….

Dilsey, who distinctly recalls Mammy Caroline Barr…epitomizes the kind of Christian Faulkner most deeply admired. She is saved by a minimum of theology…. In the figure of Dilsey, Faulkner re-created the haven of love he had found in Mammy Callie; in the figure of Caddy, he created one he knew only through longing. If the first of these figures is all maternal, the second is curiously mixed. In the figure of the sister he never had we seen not only a sister but a mother (the role she most clearly plays for Benjy) and a lover (the possibility most clearly forbidden)."

David Minter
"Faulkner, Childhood, and the Making of *The Sound and the Fury*"
American Literature 51.3
(Duke 1979) 376-93

"Both *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* [are] reversed picaresque…not a sequence of bizarre incidents happening to a single hero, but a sequence of bizarre heroes happening to a single incident…. This atomized Southern family [the Compsons], caught in the conflicts of ancient honor, modern commercialism, self-pity, cynicism, diseased love, becomes Faulkner's impassioned metaphor for the modern crisis of meaning…. The most difficult task in reading *The Sound and the Fury* is to get beyond this opening section… Following Benjy's freedom from time and interpretation comes the time-possessed Quentin, who wants nothing more than to *replace* life with interpretation. Reality for Quentin is primarily change—in particular the change implicit to the sexual identity of his sister Caddy—and interpretation, metaphor, is the created ground of permanence in which change is eliminated…. Caddy's development from child to adolescent and her subsequent loss of virginity epitomizes that change which, in Quentin's mind, is the essence of confusion….

Against this vision of formlessness Quentin props a Byronic fable of incest between himself and Caddy, thus gilding what Father calls her 'natural human folly' into a horrific one. Through metaphor he informs his confusion with the clarity of hell…. But what is most important is that this hell, and the incest that enables Quentin and Caddy to deserve it, is purely imaginary…. Quentin's need to alter an unbearable reality through language owes much to the teachings of his father…. Mr. Compson's theme has been the futility of human action. Anxious to believe his father is wrong, Quentin clings to the moral codes of Southern antebellum myth: if a woman has been deflowered it can only be because 'he made you do it let him he was stronger than you,' and a loyal brother will avenge her… The deliberate flight from fact that dominates Quentin's monologue reverses the effect of Benjy's monologue that precedes it. Benjy has made us aware of the distortions of the literal; his language is exact, free of bias. It is truth, not metaphor. Yet this exaggerated objectivism results in the most simplistic of moral designs. Quentin, on the other hand, has plunged into metaphor…

Jason…is in fact far less aware of what is actually real than his brother Quentin. Such is our quickness in the twentieth century to polarize rationality and emotion, intellectual and intuitive responses, that critical interpretation of *The Sound and the Fury* has found it easy to set Jason up as its rational villain, the opposite number of the high-minded, intuitive Sartorises… No man is fooled and humiliated so many times in one day by everyone from Miss Quentin to Old Man Job is going to be a match for Flem Snopes, whose coldly analytic inhumanity has so often been wrongly identified with Jason…. Standing between him and reality is his need to hold on to two opposing views of himself: one is that he is completely sufficient, the other is that he is the scapegoat of the world…. He nurtures the dream of his victimization, his suffering at the hands of the Compsons, the Gibsons, his boss Earl, even the telegraph company…. He is confusion

incarnate, guilty of all he seems to hate, hating his own image in others, the least sane and the most perversely imaginative of all the Compsons…. To compare him with Faulkner's master of analytic reasoning, Flem Snopes, is to see how absurdly distant he is from Flem…. The great irony of the section is that Jason is the one Compson who creates the appearance of ordinary social existence: he holds a job, wears a hat, visits a whorehouse regularly, and manages to fool his mother into burning what she believes are Caddy's checks. But his existence is actually a chaos of confused motion, utter disorder within the mind….

From the total immersion of the private monologue we move to the detached external view; from confused and confusing versions of reality we get an orderly, consistent portrait of the Compson family…. The traditional narrative form of this section of *The Sound and the Fury* [is authoritative]. Its externally placed perspective, its clear plotting, its coherent analysis of what the behavior of Benjy and Jason means—all of these are basic to a fiction that believes in endings and their power to press into service, and thus make intelligible, each single moment. Dilsey is the center of 'April Eighth 1928' because she is the spiritual embodiment of the fictional tradition in which it is told…. Dilsey transcends chaos by her vision of Christian order."

Donald M. Kartiganer
"[The Meaning of Form in] *The Sound and the Fury*"
The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels
(U Massachusetts 1979) 3-22

"In a traditional conception…tragedy advances through the revelation of oppositions to their resolution. Faulkner's novel, however, probes to an inchoate, divisive logic of tragedy… Instead of catastrophe, there is repeated disaster…. Benjy's bellow and Mrs. Compson's wail echo Quentin's outraged cry as he attacks the shadowy company of Caddy's seducers in the person of Gerald Bland…. If Quentin cannot have his exclusive One, Caddy, then he desires a permanent grief over the loss, for at least grief preserves feeling. He has had to learn that feeling is suffering, but then to be faced with the loss of suffering too is unthinkable…. The philosophy the father offers ends not by diminishing Quentin's pain but by threatening its significance….

Caddy, too, for all her rebellion against the family, still dramatizes its orientation when she incites Quentin to think himself her possessor, able to dispose of her as he will, in their scenes by the branch. Indeed, her development recapitulates the family's progression along the continuum from active to passive. The young Caddy who demands that brothers and servants obey her during the period of Damuddy's death, who pushes Natalie down the ladder, fights with Quentin, and dreams of being a general, giant, or king, is the same Caddy who later lies passive under the phallic knife Quentin holds to her throat and acts out a surrender to her imagined sexual 'opponent'… At the same time, however, she performs what a psychologist would call a passive aggression, for she controls and 'owns' Quentin by her sexual display, especially when he realizes at its climax that she imagines herself in someone else's arms….

We have distinguished two phases in the novel's tragic process: the decline of action into passivity, and the attempt at reversal…. It is made maddeningly plain to Quentin that his trouble at a sister's maturity and 'dishonor' is too familiarly recurrent in life to be considered unusual. The very aberration—the really unusual form and degree—of his response is exacerbated by his desperation to break out of a vicious circle of the usual…. Reverend Shegog's Easter sermon, with its contagious refrain 'I sees,' evokes the one Passion that has sufficient public standing to release the congregation's passions, otherwise 'banal' and inexpressible. The communally validated Passion, shut off from Quentin in Dilsey's world, combines with his own thoughts of Christ and his Passion to indicate that Quentin's death is a bid for tragic recognition. Quentin, in short, improvises his own passion, a suicidal 'autogethsemane'…."

Warwick Wadlington
"*The Sound and the Fury*: A Logic of Tragedy"
American Literature 53.4
(Duke 1981) 409-23

"Shegog's sermon creates a moment of transfigured vision for Dilsey; we might presume not only that she sees the beginning and the ending of all human time in the example of Christ's death and resurrection,

but also that she has fitted the rise and fall of her particular Compson family into the inevitable cycles of human history. She has accepted the end of the family. I suggest that her vision has been stimulated by the uncanny similarities between Shegog's inspired imagery and the Compson situation, and that such a transfiguration of the Compson story embodies one of the ambitions of the novel's concluding section. A miracle of the St. Louis preacher's sermon is that it answers so much of what Dilsey calls the 'Compson devilment'….

The achievement of Shegog's sermon stands at the very center of a novel's customary aspiration for its conclusion. The transfiguration of earlier events in which the end is immanent…occurs for Dilsey as a result of Shegog's performance…. The moment epitomizes a climax of sense with which *The Sound and the Fury* might have ended, but does not. Shegog's sermon succeeds, moreover, because it rescues conclusiveness from irresolution…. Knowing that his sermon has not struck…Reverend Shegog dramatically modulates into his listeners' dialect. The sermon succeeds because it is willing to say, and then say again; it indulges its personal voice and then accommodates its audience. The result is spectacular….

The novel, like the sermon, might have striven for the revelation of comprehensive meaning; it might have attempted, like the passage from the first to the second performance, to resolve the pauses at the end of the opening three sections into a full cadence in the last. The idiosyncratic strangeness of the monologue's voices might have yielded utterly to the accommodating familiarity of the final section. Instead, the novel prefers a difficult concord, one that denies the possibility of absolute disclosure."

John T. Matthews
The Play of Faulkner's Language
(Cornell 1982)

"He had written the novel, he said, mainly to satisfy a need to write as he wished to write without undue concern for what publishers or the public might think, and his writing merited priority…. In *The Sound and the Fury* he focused attention on Candace Compson, who by her escape from the restrictions of Jefferson and family infuriated her first brother, Jason, left a second, Quentin, with unresolved stirrings that eventually drove him to suicide, and hopelessly devastated a third, the idiot whom they called Benjy. To each of the brothers in *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner gave a section of the narrative, letting each reveal both himself and the personality of his absent sister and in addition the moribund tradition with its antiquated prescriptions of behavior appropriate to men and women that still governed at least three of them, Benjy being as innocent and therefore exempt.

In a final section, in which Faulkner served as omniscient narrator, the story at last comes clear and by means of Dilsey, the family's black cook, who serves as the section's central intelligence, presents those virtues of compassion and understanding that in her person stand between the family and total disintegration in its last days. Most readers found the book difficult; but a number of critics praised it, and Faulkner, pleased and excited by even a modicum of success, set to work on another experiment, this one the account of an indigent farm family, the Bundrens, who set out on a bizarre journey with the body of a dead mother to satisfy her wish to be buried with relatives in Jefferson."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 81-82

Michael Hollister (2015)