

ANALYSIS

“That Evening Sun” (1931)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“There exists a short story about the Compson family, written by Faulkner some time after the novel, which throws a retrospective light on the book...a tale of childish innocence playing itself out on the margin of adult terror. In this story we see Quentin, Jason, and Caddy when they are children. Their personalities are formed: little Quentin is the uncertain and sentient being we will meet at Harvard; Caddy is kindness and empathy; and Jason, a mere toddler, is already a little tale-telling rat. The story deals with Nancy, who has been temporarily replacing Dilsey in the Compson kitchen. She has been raped by a white man and is to have a child. Her husband has vowed that he will kill her and leave her body in the ditch near their hut. As each day’s sun goes down Nancy fears the worst; and in the episode narrated in the tale she entices the children to her hut and plays games with them to fend off the terrible moment when she must face the night alone—and the prospect of her doom.

In the midst of this the children go about their games aware that Nancy acts strangely, but preoccupied with their world and the assertion of their diminutive egos. They are oblivious of the adult drama; we never know whether Nancy was killed and left in a ditch for the vultures, as she feared. The story is concerned with the children, and with her terror, not her death. But in *The Sound and the Fury* there are several allusions to Nancy’s bones lying in that ditch. We learn, however, that Roskus shot a crippled mare named Nancy on that spot and that the children thought the vultures had stripped the horse’s flesh from the bones. The egg-and-omelette critics have accused Faulkner of creating ‘additional obfuscation’ by having two Nancys, one horse and one woman.

This again represents a failure to grasp the very nature of this book. In life, animals and humans often have the same names; and what Faulkner is recording is the process of association: that ditch and the name Nancy (whether of woman or horse) are forever linked in the memories of the Compsons with death and decay and with that night of Nancy’s strange terror. This is particularly significant in that the common memory of the Compson children in *The Sound and the Fury* centers around what occurred in the house at the time of their grandmother’s death. The short story, although wholly separate from the novel, embodies within it the novel’s central theme: in both tale and novel Faulkner is seeking to show childhood innocence, unaware of an adult world which it will come to know in its own measured time: the world of suffering and death, and bigotry and hatred and atrophy—and sound and fury.”

Leon Edel

The Modern Psychological Novel
(Grosset & Dunlap 1955) 174-75

“Faulkner’s two best stories—the two that may, I think, be called ‘great’—are ‘That Evening Sun’ and ‘Red Leaves.’ The first of these, told by Quentin Compson, portrays the fear of a Negro servant that her estranged husband will murder her during the night. Written in dialogue which flits about the action but never quite touches it, the story evokes an aura of primitive terror—the image of a human being waiting to be killed by another. Basically, however, ‘That Evening Sun’ is not about the Negro characters at all. In the end it becomes clear that the incident of the Negroes has been used merely as a test for the moral stamina of the Compsons. Throughout the story the Compsons ‘do’ virtually nothing, but in their reactions to the closeness of death—their pity or indifference, their generosity or selfishness—they are brought to distinct being. ‘That Evening Sun’ is a triumph of indirect presentation, art by ricochet.”

Irving Howe

William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 266-67

“Narrated by Quentin Compson as a young child...the story deals with a Negro washerwoman named Nancy, living in a cabin near the Compson house. Nancy cooks for the Compsons when Dilsey, their regular servant, is ill. She is also a prostitute, and is mortally afraid of Jesus, her estranged husband, who she believes is trying to kill her—apparently because she is pregnant by another man. The Compson children—Quentin, who is nine, and Caddy and Jason, his younger sister and brother—observe the action, but understand very little of its significance. The entire situation of the family—Mrs. Compson’s whining querulousness and Mr. Compson’s ineffectual attempts to placate her while trying to look out for Nancy—is briefly but subtly delineated.

Dilsey remains ill for some time, and the Compsons finally arrange a pallet in the kitchen for Nancy, who is afraid to go home to her cabin because she thinks that Jesus is lying in wait for her in the ditch. When Dilsey returns to work, Mrs. Compson refuses to let Nancy stay in the house for the night and Nancy, frightened but still clever, persuades the children to come to her cabin with her. She tells them a story and tries desperately to entertain them and keep them with her, but Jason is fretful and wants to go home, and the two older children are becoming uneasy. Finally, Mr. Compson arrives; he is sympathetic to Nancy’s fears, but does not believe that she is in imminent danger. He takes the children away, and Nancy is so convinced that Jesus will get her no matter what she does that she does not even close the door.

Nancy’s fate is not disclosed in this story, but there is a strong suggestion that she will actually be killed. She is resurrected to become a central character as Nancy Mannigoe in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951). It is ironic that in the short story the white family she loyally serves refuses to take her fears seriously and thus is partially responsible for her death, while in *Requiem* she sacrifices her own life so that her white employer, Temple Drake, might find some kind of moral salvation.

‘That Evening Sun’ is one of Faulkner’s most anthologized stories; it displays some of the best elements of his fictional technique, particularly the contrast between Nancy’s calm horror of the death she knows awaits her and the children’s total failure to sense that horror; they comment on her strange actions, but are untouched by the fear behind them. This is particularly brought out in the last sentence with Quentin’s question, ‘Who will do our washing now, Father?’ With the impersonal curiosity of childhood, he placidly accepts Nancy’s expected death.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 177-78

Michael Hollister (2015)