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Some Notes On The Tragedy In William Faulkner's "The Sound And The Fury"

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Whatever else it may be, and it has run the gamut of critical evaluation, the novel "The Sound and the Fury" is a tragedy. Whether or not it is a tragedy. Whether or not it is a tragedy in the dynamic tradition of Sophocles and Shakespeare or Whether it is so lacking in moral resonance as to be merely an agglomeration of perverted and questionable ideas remains to be seen, but by a complex interweaving of incident and character, the personages in the novel are destined to doom, and nothing in the finite world can alter that destiny."

Cover Page Footnote

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SOME NOTES ON THE TRAGEDY IN
WILLIAM FAULKNER'S
"THE SOUND AND THE FURY"

JAMES BOND

"We paint life merely as it is, but beyond that—nothing at all. We have neither immediate nor remote aims, and in our soul there is a great empty space.—ANTON CHEKOV

Whatever else it may be, and it has run the gamut of critical evaluation, the novel, "The Sound and the Fury" is a tragedy. Whether or not it is a tragedy in the dynamic tradition of Sophocles and Shakespeare or whether it is so lacking in moral resonance as to be merely an agglomeration of perverted and questionable ideas remains to be seen, but by a complex interweaving of incident and character, the personages in the novel are destined to doom, and nothing in the finite world can alter that destiny.

As in traditional tragedy, there is a conflict situation. George Marion O'Donnell in his essay *Faulkner's Mythology* (Kenyon Review, Summer 1939) expounds the thesis that there exists a conflict between amoral modernism and traditionalism. This thesis has in general been acknowledged as one of the more serious and objective ways of seeing Faulkner's novel as a whole. "Quentin Compson represents all that is left of a decadent moral code," O'Donnell states; "the rest of his family have succumbed entirely to amoral modernism." These two groups

become in O'Donnell's interpretation not so much persons as polar antithesis in a conflict of moral codes. Similarly, Quentin, the tragic hero, in Faulkner's words, "loved not the idea of incest which he could not commit, but some concept of its eternal punishment: he could by that means cast himself and his sister both into hell, where he could guard her forever amid the eternal fires." In other words, Quentin, the personification of traditional values, by means of his false proclamation, attempts to turn his sister's meaningless degeneracy into significant doom. The climax of the tragedy is of course Quentin's suicide. Seeing the impending doom, the disintegration of his own traditional values around him, he makes the inevitable sacrifice. The remainder of the story, although its chronology is actually hopelessly jumbled by the author's "stream of consciousness" technique is anticlimactic in the sense that the family's already obvious degeneracy is merely confirmed and brought to its consummation. It is interesting to note that O'Donnell believes Faulkner to be a

"traditional moralist in the best senses," which would seem to refute the critics who deprecate him as a depraved modernist, nescient of any universal values.

On the other hand, the horror, perversion, and cruelty, exemplified especially by the emasculation of the idiot Benjy, which pervade the novel, lessen its aesthetic value. In many cases the horrible and the cruel are legitimate aesthetic agents, as in *Oedipus* and *Lear*. However such is not the effect produced in "The Sound and the Fury". Faulkner has failed to transmute the raw material in such a way as to give a purely aesthetic effect. He appeals to the viscera, not to the mind. The theme of tragedy, the degeneracy and lack of perspective arising in the human spirit as a result of the collapse

of a traditional order and its values, is potentially great. However, here again Faulkner has failed to make the tragedy a significant and profound one because his hero has no true universal values but only a pseudo-idealistic sense of tradition and a warped and perverted sense of honor. Therefore he loses nothing of value by his downfall and defeat and the theme itself becomes a hollow one. Furthermore, Quentin's false and perverted proclamation of incest and his final suicide are so lacking in moral resonance as to force the tragedy into the sphere of naturalism—the blind and purposeless dead end where all values are ephemeral because they are merely engendered by transient beliefs sanctified by tradition.

