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

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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
WALDEN: FROM CABIN TO BATH-HOUSE
JOSEPH G. DARTIS

The citizens of Concord, Massachusetts, whose ancestors "fled the shoe hazard round the world," have mustered to defend one of the most famed cultural shrines in our nation. Nothing less than the woodland site of Henry David Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond is being threatened with mutilation by bulldozer and power-saw.

With a request in hand for improved bathing facilities and outdoor refreshment stands at Walden, the Middlesex County Commissioners of the state of Massachusetts have begun their program of "reconstruction." Their aim is to transform the world-renowned site into an expanded recreation center.

For years the value of the Thoreau Memorial has been seriously impaired by the existing bathing facilities at Walden Pond. Any further additions to or expansion of the present recreational facilities would certainly add final ruin to the noble shrine. With modern transportation so rapid and efficient, the people of Massachusetts can easily go to other state ponds or bathing beaches.

The immediate problem is how this 'reconstruction' program can be reconciled with the deeds of gift which bestowed the shrine on the public, the object being to preserve the Walden of Emerson and Thoreau, its shores and woodlands (which have already undergone substantial devastation).

To be sure the error of the Middlesex County Commissioners at Walden is not intentional. It is rather an error of judgment. For their original aim was to develop and clean up Walden, which is itself commendable, but they have confused the idea of an historic or cultural shrine with the idea of a recreation center for mass bathing. The two are incompatible.

The question now is: how to rectify the mistake? Legally this project is a violation of the deed of gift, but the law moves slowly. However, preventive measures are now being taken. I know of a young author, Truman Nelson, a member of the Thoreau Society, who is presently involved in the necessary court procedures to halt this Walden desecration. A committee also has been set up by this Society to legally stop this havoc at Walden. If you, as an interested reader, would like to add your word of protest, you may forward your letter of support to Mr. Truman Nelson, 20 Beckford Street, Salem, Massachusetts, or contact one of the editors of this magazine.

By all means, Walden Pond should be a shrine for the public. But any person who is not willing to hike into Walden as Thoreau himself did, and enjoy that green memorial, does not deserve the privilege. Let us not allow Walden Pond to be made a shrine to pop bottles, beach-toilets and litter bags.

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

"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 gauntlet 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 perplexed 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 1959) expounds the thesis that there exists a conflict between moral 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 anathemas 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. As in traditional tragedy, there is a conflict situation. George Marion O'Donnell in his essay Faulkner's Mythology (Kenyon Review, Summer 1959) expounds the thesis that there exists a conflict between moral 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 anathemas 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. As in traditional tragedy, there is a conflict situation. George Marion O'Donnell in his essay Faulkner's Mythology (Kenyon Review, Summer 1959) expounds the thesis that there exists a conflict between moral 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 anathemas 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.
"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.

It began and ended with a flash. His hands moved swiftly, grabbing at the drunken levers, and all at once he was out. Tearing, smashing through the solid air, the noise resounding in his ears, he sped earthward. His body moved quickly, the flashing clouds and dancing sun weaving a kaleidoscopic pattern on his aching eyes. Even now the fear was in his throat, and the wind ripped away his scream. With a jarring shock the parachute opened. His bouncing, spinning body came to rest. Down was restored and he felt suddenly calmed, even relieved to be here with nothing under his boots but the hazy-shrouded emptiness of air. The earth was a recognizable map, tilting back and forth, teetering, but very solid. He looked up at the red-white canopy above him; he became dizzy and afraid again. The earth below moved closer to him. As it rushed up his senses cleared. He could see where he would land. The ice and snow rammed up and up and he hit—rolling, scrambling, legs, arms, head all mingling in one pain—and it was over. He lay quiet. He listened to the cold wind and the shaking of his body and he was peaceful.

You must get up. You must come back to life again. You know you must yet you don't. Get up, get up. Remember Mary and the comfortable home, the embracing womb of civilization. The cold is here and it will overpower you and what comes after that? This is resignation and you are worse than a coward. You are through. . . . This is almost pleasant. Is this the peace, the ease you have been seeking all your life? No one to impress, no one to talk with, no duties. There is just you and your own body.

The toes of his feet were now coated with the shifting snow. Little drifts peaked against his body like warm brown sand. He hadn't moved, he was just a dark blotch against the glaring whiteness. The sun beat down, but there was no heat. Just the clear, impenetrable cold.