



RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2 3 4 9 - 9 4 5 1

Vol.2.Issue.1.,2015

FAULKNER'S THE SOUND AND THE FURY AND THE CHALLENGE OF MODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is one of the most anthologized, most criticized work of modern American literature. His unique attitude for depicting reality mingled with traditional southern values and a modern sense of loss and chaos, in the twentieth century's wasteland. Written in 1929, this novel uses many of the thematic and stylistic elements used by modernists.

In this essay the main focus is to analyze Faulkner's text drawing out modernist elements and where necessary interjecting his realistic techniques in order to reveal the novel's ambivalent status in stylistic application that led to its great success and popularity among the modernist fiction.

Keywords: The Sound and the Fury, Modernism, realism, Theme, Stylistic technique

Article Info:

Article Received:04/03/2015

Revised on: 13/03/2015

Accepted on: 18/03/2015

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INTRODUCTION

Modernity is a new concept and it means that the present time, is not in any respect the continuation of the past. It refers to a revolution in sociocultural process that had been shaping by the end of the 19th century as the great philosophers and thinkers expected the apocalyptic turn of the century. There were social reasons like the urbanization, industrial revolution, shifting in class structure etc., and intellectual reasons like the "decline in religious teleology" and the rise of science and secular philosophy. Furthermore there were psychological reasons that establish the "changing notion of the nature individuals, social life, sex and gender relations." (Bradbury 3)

Modern literature there for represent a sense of newness and innovation or as the slogan of those days echoes "Make it New!" aura within itself. Modern writers became more frank in their treatment of sexual matters under the influence of Zola and Freud and they wanted a firm break from the past to show their artistic and imaginative discovery. They questioned the traditional marriage and family relationship and "modern marriage" became their concern. (Bradbury 22) Writers tend to develop eroticism as well as sexual ambiguity in gender which call the attention to gay and lesbian writings. It was all in all the time of freedom. Freedom from whatever chained the writers' mind in the past. The put behind the crises of morality and religious crises and began to experiment an independent style that break all the teleological frames as well as technical conventions in writing. They attempted to break away from realism and the conventions of writing like plot, character and chronological order etc. to a more complex stylistic obscurity.

One of the popular modern techniques was interior monologue and stream of consciousness which is very notable Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce's fiction.

However as much as the prewar modern fiction had the atmosphere of the excitement of the experimentation, the post war modern writings seem to be hollowed from within. The utopia of the modern writers was shattered by the havoc of war and a sense of loss and uncertainty became dominant. The modern writers were disillusioned and reflected their depression, uncertainty, and nightmarish feelings in their writings. As Bradbury suggests it:

Directly or indirectly, the wound of war was everywhere in the post-war novel, explaining the note of sharp generational change, historical weariness, waste-land vision and rootless psychological tension so plain in much of the best fiction.(151)

It is noteworthy to say that after the 20s was over the writers of the next decades were more shocked in the aftermath of The Second World War. Their disillusionment of all the promising ideologies, hopes and human life made the meaninglessness and absurdity the spirit of the age. It was the age of futility that some would declare as postmodern.

The Influence of Modernity on Faulkner

Philip Weinstein illustrates that Faulkner is usually considered as a modernist because his books have the "critical in its relationship to the social contexts"(18).It moves away from the 19th century American realism and consciously criticize the realities it represent.However Faulkner's attitude toward the criticism of the past and its values and conventions is very tactful. "That past may well be dead to belief, but it retains its haunting power."(Weinstein 22) Thus although Faulkner's work poses a modernist style of criticism it also exposes the limitation and difficulties that they face to break away from the past. *The Sound and the Fury* as an example keeps this realist vision toward the past but mingles it with experimental modernist technique to make an ironic criticism of the sociocultural situation of the time. To reveal the modern complexity and critical tendency of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the major characteristics, themes and techniques of modern fiction popular in the 20s are examined with the textual references to this novel in order to explain how it manifests these features.

Popular Modernist theme and concept:

1-Disillusionment and Despair

Due to the traumatic turbulence of the WWI, the Utopia of Modernists was shattered and their excitement changed into despair and disillusionment. Furthermore the American Faulkner experienced the Great Crash of 1929 that led to fall of the stock market and finally American Depression. Faulkner echoes this feeling of uncertainty, loss and rootlessness in *The Sound and the Fury* in different forms. The whole house represent the loss of Southern values, religious doctrines, morality and whatever belonged to the past; each character experiences the loss in his/her own ways. Caddy's loses her virginity; Benjy's loses his manhood by being castrated, Quentin's loses Caddy as she grows up to be a promiscuous girl, even Luster's unimportant loss of his quarter and many more. Despite that Faulkner depicted every character's disillusionment throughout the novel. Mr. Compson, the descendant of the great Compson family has turned into and alcoholic, careless man who no longer believe in the Southern values. He is careless about his daughter's promiscuity and in return to Quentin's devastation about Caddy:

He said it was men invented virginity not women. Father said it's like death: only a state in which the others are left and I said, But to believe it doesn't matter and he said, That's what's so sad about anything: not only virginity and I said, Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin and he said, That's why that's sad too.(Faulkner 42)

Quentin is disillusioned by his father's indifference and absurd deduction. He sees that he had lost everything that relates to the moral codes which were once honorable for The Compsons. This became unbearable and finally led to his suicidal act to end his desperation.

2-Dismissing the religion and Spiritual Emptiness

One of the significant themes of Modernist fiction is the absence of spiritual attachment. The world became what Eliot calls the spiritual wasteland which is barren and sterile. Faulkner portrays this in the

characters loss of faith and religion. All of the Compsons with the exception of the lunatic Benjy dismiss believing in any religion. They never talk about God or even religious conducts. The only hope is Benjy whose name and age remind us very implicitly of a Jesus like character but he is literally castrated and sterile. However Dilsey, the black servant women, is the only light in this wasteland. She is a devoted Christian and goes to the church on Easter, listens to the Father and above all believe in Benjy as the only innocent man in this family

3-Frankness in sexual representation

The Modernists were very much influenced by Freud's theories of unconscious desires and Freudian overtone is very obvious in their writing. Like his contemporaries Faulkner also walked in the realm of the sexual unconscious and explored it through different characters. This is very much highlighted in Caddy's promiscuous behavior which finally led to her loss of virginity and pregnancy. Caddy frankly talked to Quentin about her sexual relationship out of the wedlock and the urge to marry someone to hide the illegitimate child of it:

Got to marry some body
 Have there been very many Caddy
 I dont know too many will you look after Benjy and Father
 You dont know whose it is then does he know
 Dont touch me will you look after Benjy and Father(Faulkner58)

Years later her own daughter Miss Quentin continues this behavior, as if she has inherited it from her mother. She became promiscuous and skips her classes at school to have sex with various men. Luster who observe her action every nights; casually refer this in a conversation with the man with the red tie- Quentin's partner from the carnival;

"Who come to see her last night." he said.
 "I dont know." Luster said. "They comes every night she can climb down that tree. I dont keep no track of them."
 "Damn if one of them didn't leave a track." he said. He looked at the house. Then he went and lay down in the swing.(Faulkner 29)

Faulkner did not just stop with the presentation of Caddy and Miss Quentin's promiscuity he shocked the reader by Quentin's strange obsession with Caddy that goes far beyond fraternal relationship when he dares to suggest Caddy to tell others that they have done an incestuous act, which he thought to be more honorable saying that "*I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames*"(Faulkner 42)

Quentin is very much concerned with her sister's virginity that the year she lost it is equal to his spiritual death he says, "*I died last year I told you I had but I didn't know then what I meant I didn't know what I was saying*".(Faulkner 61) He was haunted by his desire for Caddy, all the time. Faulkner skillfully presents it through the smell of honeysuckle. He could sense it whenever he was in the presence of women, in the trolley, on the road with the little Italian girl, at the back of the car with her friends; and all the time it reminds her of Caddy, the seductive sensation about her as she climbed the tree with her muddy underwear. It will increase when Caddy came so near him holding his hands after he was hit by Dalton Ames:

[S]he held my hand against her chest her heart thudding I turned and caught her arm
 Caddy you hate him dont you
 she moved my hand up against her throat her heart was hammering there
 poor Quentin
 her face looked at the sky it was low so low that all smells and sounds of night seemed to have been crowded down like under a slack tent especially the honeysuckle it had got into my breathing it was on her face and throat like paint her blood pounded against my hand I was leaning on my other arm it began to jerk and jump and I had to pant to get any air at all out of that thick gray honeysuckle. (Faulkner 73-74)

There are other examples of Freudian libidinal tendency in the novel; we see Jason is attracted to Miss Quentin, though he does not say it explicitly. As some of Faulkner scholars suggest, part of Jason's hatred and cruel behavior toward his niece emanate from his desire for her. (Hargrove 56) examining the text with scrutiny it would be possible to find some evidence in Jason's treatment of her and his own description of the scene, "I dragged her into the dining room. Her kimono came unfastened, flapping about her, dam near naked. Dilsey came hobbling along. I turned and kicked the door shut in her face." (Faulkner 89) Later when they were in the street and Jason quarreled with Miss Quentin, she seductively threatens to tear her dress off:

I'd tear it right off and throw it into the street," she says. "Dont you believe me?"

"Sure you would," I says. "You do it every time."

"See if I wouldn't," she says. She grabbed the neck of her dress in both hands and made like she would tear it.

"You tear that dress," I says, "and I'll give you a whipping right here that you'll remember all your life."

"See if I dont," she says. Then I saw that she really was trying to tear it, to tear it right off of her. (91)

It seems that Jason's' obsession made him angrier as if he was her lover or more and he hate it when he could not do anything about it so he maintains to threaten her with harsher punishment for protection like whipping which made him angrier when she did not care about it.

4-Lack of Human Commitment

Modernist literature also investigates the human relationship and commitment in the time of spiritual death. Relationship became very superficial and real love faded away. In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* this has been very well depicted. The Compson children longed the love that was absent in the family. Mrs. Compson was lost in her hypochondriac attitude and did not pay attention to any of them except Jason. Which caused Quentin's famous line, "if I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother" (Faulkner 84). Mr. Compson on the other hand shows no paternal love toward his children, of course he had sold the pasture for Quentin's education at Harvard, but beside that no more affection is received. His presence is equal to his absence.

Moreover it must be noted that none of the children develop a successful romantic relationship outside the family. Quentin is obsessed with Caddy and he cannot get away from it even after her marriage to Herbert Head, Caddy and later Miss Quentin have different partners and do not develop a firm, romantic love relationship, Jason spends his time and money on a prostitute from Memphis . Love is all lost in the family and has been replaced by negative desperate feelings like hopelessness and depression and above all hatred.

5-Criticism of materialism

The turn of the century and the drastic changes in the markets after the Wars and Depression modernist writers began to attack excessive materialism related to the previous decades. *The Sound and the Fury* attack this attitude especially with its critical view on Jason's character. Faulkner depict him as the one who was in love with money buy foreshadowing it with the description of him hands in the pocket even from his childhood. Jason is not kind or affectionate but he is only ambitious to gain money in any way possible. He has bought an expensive car and steals the money Caddy send for Miss Quentin in a strongbox. Yet he is all robbed of his future when the money is lost. Faulkner suggested that too much ambition for money and material life would finally result in devastation.

Modernists' Technique in Narration

1-Fragmentation and Juxtaposition

Like his contemporaries Faulkner uses experimental technique in *The Sound and the Fury*. One of these innovations is the use of fragmentation and juxtaposition of ideas, images , scenes, settings, sentences and even sentences. Benefiting from the cinematic technique of montage, his narrative came to be suffocating with fragmentary sentences that flash back to other events. The obscurity is very high in the first chapter with Benjy's narration. As a severely retarded man he cannot distinguish past and present and in this way all his words juxtapose with every change in nostalgic images, sounds and even smell.

...Hush, now." Luster said. "Aint I told you youcant go up there. They'll knock your head clean off with one of them balls. Come on, here." He pulled me back. "Sit down." I sat down and he took off my shoes and rolled up my trousers. "Now, git in that water and play and see can you stop that slobbering and moaning."

.....

Caddy was all wet and muddy behind, and I started to cry and she came and squatted in the water.

"Hush now." she said. "I'm not going to run away." So I hushed. Caddy smelled like trees in the rain.(Faulkner 91)

Here the thirty three year old Benjy is transferred to his childhood when he goes to the river, the water remind him Caddy and their playing beside the river and the time when she muddied her underwear, which Benjy didn't like. Faulkner juxtaposes everything without introduction and it's the task of the alert reader to relate them. He made loose repetitive sentences, without punctuation, yet sometimes italicized just to add more ambiguity for his experimental narration.

2-Stream of Consciousness

From the late 19th century after Freud and others called the attention to the human consciousness, stream of consciousness became popular among the writers. Quite contrary to the traditional narrative technique where the author would tell the reader about the characters thoughts this is a nonlinear, fragmentary report of one's thought that shows the fluidity of human consciousness. With this technique the author writes as if he is in the character's mind. In this respect every image, symbol or impression would touch upon another regardless of time. There is no sense of chronological order, and the mind shifts between past and present. As Dennis explained "Presentation of character via images that stream through consciousness matched the modernist concept of incoherent and fragmented selfhood". (12)

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner utilizes this technique in order to show the subjectivity in one's thoughts and the difference in every individual perspective. It is interesting how Faulkner use the stream of consciousness in each chapter differently. The reader could hardly understand anything in Benjy's section due to his severe mental disorder. Benjy's wording is not difficult but since he only relies on images, sounds,... the reader would be lost in its complexity. Quentin's section seems to be more complicated in vocabulary however his mind is only focused on two major ideas, Caddy's promiscuity and his father's ignorance. His mind shift back and forth in past and present as he prepares himself in his last hours before his committing suicide. Jason on the other hand is concerned not about others, or any kind of values. His mind is occupied with his passion for money and hatred toward Caddy and Miss Quentin. He blames Caddy for robbing her out of the promised jib at Herbert's bank and thus his unfulfilling life. Unlike Benjy and Quentin he is not obsessed with Caddy and the past, but he focus aimlessly on the present and future.

3-Multiple Narrative Points of View

Faulkner narrates the story of the Compson's fall through different point of views. Each chapter has a specific narrator. They are Benjy, Quentin, Jason and the last one an omniscient narrator respectively. Faulkner presented every individual's mind and emphasized on the subjectivity which is one of the important Modernist codes. He illustrates how unique ones' thought could be at the same time how the Compson children share some feelings. Caddy, who is never a narrator in this novel, is the center of the attention of every other narrator.

Moreover using first person narrator in the three chapters is shows Faulkner's attempt to come close to the reality and its description. However as a Modernist he does not believe in one truth but multiple truths which depends upon individuals.

CONCLUSION

Faulkner tactfully shows his modernist feeling of loss, uncertainty, disillusionment that were caused by the drastic wars and economic depression, through the application of modernist techniques like fragmentation, juxtaposition, stream of consciousness and multiple points of views not only to depict his major

difference with the previous realistic writings of the 19th century but also to treat reality in a different pluralistic mode that adds to the greatness and uniqueness of his book among modernist fictions.

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